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# Deep Play

## Rationality in the Life World with Special Reference to Sailing

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In an essay on the rationality of play, the author characterizes rationality by the three distinct demands it makes on the individual—demands for autonomy, solidarity, and integrity. He develops each of these as they apply to the sport of sailing, using the example of two deep-ocean expeditions to arrive at a concept of deep play he sees as one solution to the existential problem of living rationally. In the course of doing so, he suggests why so many disparate activities fall under this concept of deep play and concludes with a reflection on how deep play transcends sports. **Key words:** autonomy; Bernard Moitessier; integrity; deep play; rationality of play; sailing; solidarity

**A** TOWERING FIGURE in the history of ocean sailing, Bernard Moitessier began sailing traditional junks in Vietnam where he was born. At twenty-one, he ran a business shipping cargo between Rach Gia and Kampot, Cambodia. He made his first long ocean voyage with his friend Pierre Deshumeurs in a boat so leaky they had to pump water constantly to keep it afloat. He sailed alone from Vietnam in 1952 headed for France, but he ran aground on reefs near Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean and spent three years in Mauritius building a new craft with his own hands. He lost this second boat in the Caribbean and finished his trip to France by airplane. A 1966 voyage with his wife Francoise took him to Tahiti and back via Cape Horn and set a record as the longest ever nonstop voyage by a yacht.

Moitessier's most famous exploit began as a race on August 22, 1968, an unusual race, the first of its kind—a single-handed and nonstop race around the world, called the Golden Globe. After the competitors agreed to the rules and a newspaper put up prize money, what began as a theoretical discussion among friends took on a life of its own and became a sporting event. Six months later, sailing hard in the southern Atlantic aboard *Joshua*, his forty-two-foot steel ketch, Moitessier appeared the race leader. He had crossed his outward track

and was expected to turn toward Plymouth, England, and the finish line. But he then made a decision that changed everything. Instead of turning north, he set a course for the Cape of Good Hope and continued to sail on. On March 18, he used a slingshot to propel a film canister onto the deck of a tanker off Cape Town. The canister contained a message that read, in part, “I am continuing non-stop towards the Pacific Islands because I am happy at sea, and perhaps also to save my soul.”<sup>1</sup>

Abandoning the race, he set out on a voyage to which the simple words “sport” or “game” or “play” seem to apply only suggestively. Something deeper was going on—a more complicated form of play, let me call it deep play—that I believe has not been adequately conceptualized.

What Moitessier called saving his soul proved a quest to define and then to defend his integrity as a human being. In this essay, I unpack the notion of rationality to reveal a form of personal integrity in which a demand for personal autonomy and a demand for solidarity with other people and the larger world become integral in a way that fully affirms both without recourse to watertight compartments to keep them apart. Moreover, I show how the deep play of sailing constitutes a way of life in which personal integrity becomes possible. Seen this way, Moitessier’s withdrawal from the Golden Globe becomes something more significant than the idiosyncratic expression of personality. It is a model of rational action in the sphere of life.

Philosopher Steven Horrobin would call Moitessier “a sailor of the third kind.”<sup>2</sup> Such sailors, says Horrobin, “sail toward the horizon they will never reach.” For them, sailing is not a means of reaching a destination, winning a prize, setting a record, or achieving some other end external to the activity of sailing: “For the sailor of the third kind, the boat itself and its function, the life with it and within it, its relationship to the wind, the land, the ocean and its living beings, the sun, moon, stars and horizon—that process, focused through the sailor’s self, is an end *in itself*.”<sup>3</sup> For Moitessier, immersion in sailing is his happiness and his salvation. There is no further end, no extrinsic goal, no other motivation.

Such talk puts one in mind of Aristotle, for whom thinking about how to live involved identifying activities that are ends in themselves. We aim the things we do toward at least one end, says Aristotle, that we desire for its own sake and never for the sake of something else. That one end is happiness, which he understands as being fully the sort of thing one is, or as fulfilling one’s essential nature. Happiness is not a state but an activity, the activity of acquiring the

dispositions which will best enable individuals to fulfill their essential natures and living accordingly. Our essential nature is that of rational beings, and so, for Aristotle, our happiness consists in the activity of acquiring the dispositions that empower us to live rationally and then to actually live that way. Living rationally, he argued, as creatures incessantly importuned by bodily desires, requires us to determine a mean in relation to excessive and exiguous satisfaction of those desires and to choose our satisfactions in accordance with that mean.<sup>4</sup>

The modern and postmodern thinkers of our day have trouble even with the notion that human beings are rational by nature. They contest the definition of rationality as they do almost any application of the notion of nature to the explanation of human actions or higher intellectual activities. However much we embrace the deracinated account of rationality provided by rational choice theory, behavioral economists like Daniel Kahneman have shown that we do not operate rationally even with a clear and unique optimal solution. Social, evolutionary, and cognitive psychologists, having rediscovered the unconscious, find it at work in ways—and to an extent—Freud never imagined. The doctrine of the mean as the same rational standard is yet more hopeless.

Aristotle says a virtue is a mean between excess and deficiency in desire. His most persuasive example is courage, which he sees as a mean between cowardice (excessive fear) and brashness (lack of an appropriate appreciation of the actual difficulties one faces). Doubts arise about whether such a description could work as a general account of virtue. Is it possible to see justice or honesty, for example, as a mean of this sort? Can one be excessively faithful to one's spouse? There is, however, no necessary contradiction between the image of the human mind drawn by contemporary inquirers and philosophical attempts to lay out a normative theory of rationality. We need not ground our theory in anything like Aristotle's metaphysical biology.

We can, instead, see rationality as making three necessary demands on the thinker. First, believing a proposition or following a procedure could be called rational only to the extent that one's assent is autonomous; one must think the thing through for oneself and accept it on the basis of that self-thinking. This is one impetus for Socratic dialogue. Socrates wants to understand for himself the nature of, say, courage without accepting thoughtlessly the judgment of others, and he wants his interlocutors to do the same. The demand to think for oneself is a pillar of Enlightenment philosophy. *Nullius in verba* ("Take no one's word for it") is the motto of the Royal Society.

The leading figure of the empiricist Enlighteners, John Locke and his ratio-

nalist counterpart, Immanuel Kant, endorsed similar imperatives. If one takes one's beliefs on the authority of others, without thinking them through, what he has, says Locke, is hearsay rather than knowledge. "But if [your thoughts] are taken upon Trust from others, 'tis no great Matter what they are, they are not following Truth, but some meaner Consideration: and 'tis not worth while to be concerned, what he says or thinks, who says or thinks only as he is directed by another."<sup>5</sup> Kant adds: such a person has not lived up to his duty as a rational being; he has chosen immaturity. "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere aude!* [dare to know] 'Have courage to use your own understanding!'—that is the motto of enlightenment."<sup>6</sup> Contemporary psychologists have also made an empirical case for the importance of a sense of autonomy.<sup>7</sup>

Second, reason demands that one's self-thinking *convey*—in the sense of making an idea or impression or feeling understandable to others. This, too, is implicit in Socrates' practice of dialogue. We reason with ourselves to establish our autonomy. We reason with others for the sake of *solidarity*. I use English to articulate my meanings; I say what I want to say. But words do not just mean whatever I say they mean. English has a measure of objectivity about it. There is a grammar that is more or less codified. There are dictionaries with varying degrees of authority. There are the established practices of different communities of speakers. When I say something that another doubts, I reason with her to bring my meaning to her, to secure her agreement that such a thing can be said, that the words work this way. Reasoning is the presentation of a warrant; it shows others that one is a legitimate member of the community in speaking or acting as she does. It enables cooperation.<sup>8</sup> It is a further point, not to be insisted upon here, that this solidarity is necessary for me even to have a thought of my own.

Third, thinking must be whole and undivided. Purity of heart means to will one thing. Rationality of thought requires internal consistency among beliefs and alignment of belief with practice. Watertight compartments for maintaining contradictory beliefs in mutual isolation are not allowed. Nor is an unjustified gap between belief and practice. A rational person believes and acts as one consistent being. As with autonomy, there are psychological correlates to these latter two demands of rationality.<sup>9</sup>

As crazy as Moitessier's decision seemed to many at the time and may seem

to us now, we might properly see it as implicitly rational in a deep sense. This does not suggest he was consciously working a normative theory. We tend to think of rational action in general as being along the lines of driving a car. The driver surveys the situation and takes action accordingly. Vision is prophetic; it tells us what is ahead. Feeling one's way around a darkened room is a better metaphor for much of life. Movement is tentative and deflected by contact rather than adjusted with foresight. Only when one has reached the door and turned on the light does the path taken make sense. Like most of us most of the time, Moitessier was feeling his way forward. The path described, however, makes sense in retrospect when we see it as the path of someone working for his own autonomy in the context of solidarity with others while holding these values together in one consistent life.

### **Autonomy**

Autonomy is the leading theme in Moitessier's search for salvation. The notion has three distinct aspects. First, to be autonomous is to give oneself one's ends, or as some philosophers put it, to identify wholly with the ends one adopts. This fits the requirement I have mentioned, and we sometimes call it authenticity. In addition, true autonomy requires some degree of freedom to realize self-generated ends. No nation that, while making its own laws, found itself prevented by another country from enforcing those laws, could be called sovereign in regard to those laws. Similarly, no individual who was prevented by others from realizing his own ends can be autonomous, at least to the extent that he is so prevented. Third, autonomy means competence to pursue effectually one's self-given ends. A infant, even if somehow he came to have authentic ends and even if he was left unrestricted, would not be autonomous, because he would lack the ability to make effectual steps toward them. Rolled up in the idea of competence, though perhaps separable, lies the thought that one must have the willpower to pursue the self-determined ends that one is free and competent to pursue.

To Moitessier, ocean sailing means, first of all, freedom to choose his own course. Describing his final departure from Vietnam, his first solo ocean adventure, he writes: "I was free for the first time in my life, really free. Before, all my freedoms had only been little ones yoked to conditions; transient freedoms, often intense but always dependent on time or other people. Now I didn't have

to account for myself; I didn't need anyone else. I could go to Malaysia or Borneo; all I had to do was choose. . . . I was master of my life on new wings that carried me so high it sometimes gave me vertigo."<sup>10</sup> He is single-minded in his focus on his own authenticity. "All *Joshua* and I wanted was to be left alone with ourselves. Any other thing did not exist, had never existed."<sup>11</sup> The striking thing about these sentences is that they are part of a paragraph in which he is talking to, and about, his wife. Is it presumptuous to infer that Moitessier was finding family life constraining? The value of constancy, which his wife Françoise's tears suggested, is not a value with which he could identify. Pruning away the distraction of others blazes the path to authenticity: "I felt such a need to rediscover the wind of the sea; nothing else counted at that moment, neither earth nor men." He goes on, "You do not ask a tame seagull why it needs to disappear from time to time toward the open sea. It goes, that's all. . . ."<sup>12</sup> He has been tamed but he is still a seagull; the call of the sea remains the call of his own authentic self. Moitessier appears sanguine about his children, confident that they "will know enough to obey their own inner voices."<sup>13</sup> Autonomy means listening to one's own inner voice.

Autonomy also requires competence. The autonomous person takes care of himself. Moitessier felt this keenly. He was the son of a prosperous businessman, but he and his brothers seemed to have raised themselves, playing in the jungle. He became very skilled with a homemade slingshot. As a young man, he chose to make his own way crewing on cargo-carrying junks traversing the Vietnamese coast. In 1952 Moitessier bought a boat of his own and, perhaps feeling events spinning out of all control, he left Vietnam. He headed to France. He struck a reef in the Indian Ocean, which destroyed his boat. Stranded in Mauritius, he borrowed tools, scrounged materials, and built a new craft with his own hands. He continued his voyage.<sup>14</sup> Much later, when his steel cutter *Joshua* entered in the famous Golden Globe race, he refused the gift of a generator and single-sideband radio that the *Sunday Times* wanted him to carry. He thought it would complicate his life unnecessarily and distract him from the spiritual task that this voyage had become for him. He planned to relay messages to the race sponsors by launching canisters onto the decks of passing ships with his slingshot. "[I]t is so much better to shift for yourself, with the two hands God gave you. . . ."<sup>15</sup>

And shift for himself, Moitessier did. In an episode he describes at length and with considerable pride, he repairs damage done to *Joshua* in a collision with a freighter. The steel bowsprit has been twisted down and to one side. After a long period of reflection about what to do, Moitessier, uses a staysail boom, a block

and tackle, the staysail halyard, one of the boat's main winches, and a few other bits and pieces to rig a crane and straighten the sprit. Describing the moment when he sees his contrivance begin to work, he writes, "Incredible the power of a tackle on a winch . . . I feel I am going to start crying, it's so beautiful . . . the bowsprit begins to straighten out, very, very slowly. I am wild with joy!"<sup>16</sup>

This worship of competence and self-reliance is common among sailors. World traveler Joshua Slocum owned a wreck of a ketch, and he rebuilt it himself. He then sailed it around the world on his own, the first man to do so. The cruising literature contains many stories that begin with self-built boats. Other sailors, in choosing a boat, deliberately eschew auxiliary engines, electronics, refrigeration, and so on. One hears the injunction "Keep it simple!" wherever cruising sailors discuss equipment. Such is the ethic expressed in popular guides like Casey and Hackler's *Sensible Cruising: The Thoreau Approach* and Larry and Lin Pardey's *The Self-Sufficient Sailor*.<sup>17</sup> A rig more complicated than you can repair yourself puts you at the mercy of others. Borrowing money to buy it represents another chain. If it distracts you from acquiring the skills and habits you need to be self-reliant, your bondage becomes complete. Simplicity, on the other hand, frees you from a dependence on others; it can even serve as a sort of Odyssean self-bondage to prevent default from the goal of autonomy. In the Epilogue to *Once is Enough*, Miles Smeeton justified not having a radio aboard *Tzu Hang* this way: "When a small yacht sets out on a long journey, it must be entirely self-reliant. There will be no help near when trouble strikes. If the ship is out only for adventure and sport, it has no right to expect help, and it is just as well if it has no means of asking for it."<sup>18</sup>

When I reflect on the obscure, deliberative processes that led me to sailing, the first thing that comes to mind is how much I hate traffic and the sight of brake lights. In the sprawling conurbation where I live, the traffic snarl remains constant. It seems my path is always checked by jams, stoplights, and the imperious "TUNNEL BLOCKED. USE ALTERNATE ROUTE." To take to the road is to put your fate in the hands of alien gods. What a relief to be on the water! Once out of the harbor, the horizon pops open. Choose a course, set the sails, and let your eyes delight on the openness!

When the sails are up and you are well and truly underway, freedom takes an additional aspect. For me, happiness is sailing *Restless*, my little yawl, full and in a moderate breeze. With the sails properly trimmed, the boat is well balanced and the tiller pilot easily holds a steady course. Heeling fifteen degrees and moving at hull speed, the boat sails itself. I brace myself against the mizzenmast and

watch. The feeling of being lord of this little domain is exhilarating.

Autonomy is a name for this constellation of ideas: the authentic choice of one's own course, freedom from alien restrictions, and the competence to pursue the chosen course. Autonomy in this sense is the primary factor in the happiness and salvation of Bernard Moitessier.

### Solidarity

But more than the desire for autonomy motivates Moitessier. From the very beginning of his sailing career, sailing grounded a deep connection with other people and with the natural world. He marveled at the captains of the Vietnamese junks, especially their skill as navigators. He sought them out and learned from them. His first voyages on a boat of his own began with a friendship. Much later, it was friendship that brought him into the Golden Globe. The race evolved as a friendly test of seamanship in a conversation between Moitessier and his friends, Bill King and Loïck Fougeron.

He felt his connection with his sailing friends keenly. After he decided to abandon the race and continue east, he could have wisely kept far clear of the treacherous waters near the Cape of Good Hope. But the safer route would have made it impossible to get any message to his friends at the *Times*, his family, and—indirectly—to the others still in the race. Still, logic told him to shun the cape, which made him conflicted. As he puts it: "But for many days another voice has been insisting 'You are alone, yet not alone. The others need you, and you need them. Without them, you would not get anywhere, and nothing would be true.'"<sup>19</sup> He took a considerable risk to venture closer to the cape where he was more likely to encounter a vessel to which he could sling his messages and perhaps get news of his fellow racers. Often in *The Long Route*, Moitessier wonders where King and Fougeron are.

Sometimes Moitessier feels the presence of old friends and mentors, even seeing and talking to them. Moitessier writes of pondering how to fix the bent bowsprit, for example: "I had the impression that Henry Wakelam was there, close to me. From time to time I mumbled, 'Good God, if you were here, you would have already figured a way to straighten it.'"<sup>20</sup> Having completed the repair, he congratulates himself, "Henry old pal, you would be proud of your disciple." And reflecting on his earlier despair, he writes, "The day before yesterday, I had played and lost. Then I saw Henry and all his power. I saw César



as well, the foreman during *Joshua's* construction, when a steel sheet refused to fit. César used to repeat 'Man is always the strongest.' And the sheet wound up in the proper shape."<sup>21</sup>

In addition to his mentors, Moitessier identifies with a long tradition of seamanship. He encounters this tradition in the books he reads—the books of Joshua Slocum, Vito Dumas, Miles Smeeton, Alain Bombard, and others—all yachtsmen who had covered vast distances on open oceans in small craft and had written about the experiences. This tradition was also embodied in the tools, instruments, and traditional practices he employed: the block and tackle and the winch with which he straightened the bowsprit, the sextant and sight reduction tables with which he determined his location, and even the knots he used to secure his anchor to its rode or a jib sheet to the clew of the sail. Sailing alone in the open ocean, the only rational way to proceed is in the most seaman-like way; and seamanship, in part, is the collective wisdom of many.

As with other spiritual people, Moitessier's sense of solidarity extended beyond his circle of friends and family, the sailing fraternity, and even his countrymen. Moitessier felt a responsibility for humanity and for the whole natural world. Carrying on to victory in the race, facing jubilant crowds, taking home a substantial prize, and basking in much publicity were values alien to him and, therefore, finishing the competition would have threatened his autonomy. As he says in *Tamata and the Alliance*, he was fleeing from material security, a desire had moved him to continue on to Tahiti instead of finishing the Golden Globe, and a desire that led him to consider refusing the royalties for the book he had written about the voyage.<sup>22</sup> Material security meant incorporation in a civilization he could not accept. "The Western world reminds me," Moitessier writes, "of a truck crammed with millions of human beings roaring full speed toward the abyss. It's nearly there, and is picking up speed every second. . . . Nothing can be done to avoid catastrophe, and yet the solution is obvious: *take off*."<sup>23</sup>

The taking off was not a matter of personal escape. It was an act intended to raise consciousnesses. "I believe," writes Moitessier, "our purpose in life is to participate in creating the world."<sup>24</sup> He had made friends in Tahiti; he had seen possibilities for a way of life in harmony with the natural world. He had seen ways in which it was threatened. He felt obligated to help humanity imagine a better way.

Moitessier, however, was a loner at heart. When the need to rediscover the wind of the sea comes upon him, nothing else counts, "neither earth nor men." There are other ways of playing this game. The cruising adventures of Miles

and Beryl Smeeton exemplify an approach to deep play in which solidarity is a more prominent concern. Miles met Beryl in India in 1931; he was an officer in the British army, and she was the wife of Miles's commanding officer. Their acquaintance grew into a love affair, and in 1938, they married. From 1934 on, they led lives of high adventure. Miles's military career kept them apart much of the time. He distinguished himself in the army in Burma and the Western Desert, eventually emerging from the service a brigadier general. Beryl's adventures took her across four continents, often under very arduous conditions.

In the midst of the war, June 1943, the Smeetons bought 450 acres of land in a remote part of the coast of British Columbia. They lived in India at the time and bought the property without seeing it or having much of a description of it. It was to be, as Miles Clark puts it in his biography of the Smeetons, "a home where they might be self-sufficient, with perhaps a little over."<sup>25</sup> British restrictions on the amount of money its citizens could remove from the country, however, prevented the Smeetons from taking enough of their money to Canada to keep the farm afloat. They hit upon the idea of buying a boat in England, sailing it to Canada, then selling it, in effect evading the currency restrictions. Thus began another set of adventures for the Smeetons, adventures that would make them perhaps the most famous sailing couple of all time. They were barely novice sailors when they acquired *Tzu Hang*, a forty-six-foot wooden ketch, but the idea appealed to their sense of adventure and offered scope for the pursuit of values that were authentic for them: most importantly, self-reliance, the development of a new competence, and their mutual admiration and enjoyment of each other's company.

On several of their voyages others joined them. They befriended a young man, John Guzzwell, who made several voyages on *Tzu Hang*. The friendship between Miles and Beryl Smeeton and Guzzwell, as Miles recounts in *Once Is Enough* and *The Sea Was Our Village*, is the most touching in sailing literature. Jonathan Raban, in his excellent introduction to the Sailor's Classics edition of *Once Is Enough* summarizes the story well.

The first six chapters of the book present *Tzu Hang* as a scale model of a happy and well-ordered society in which everybody and everything has its function and its proper place. . . . These chapters celebrate the roles and skills of the three people aboard, their intense affection for each other . . . and their shared dedication to keeping the boat afloat and on course.

On *Tzu Hang*, the brigadier and the carpenter pull on the same rope. Divisions of gender, class, and age are dissolved in a common cause. Aboard

this 46-foot utopia, headed for the wilds of the Southern Ocean, three exiles from England are setting a shining example to their troubled and class-riven native land.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to this fundamental friendship, the Smeeton were gregarious. Meeting new people was part of the point of their voyages. They wintered over in Japan, renting a house there. They relished the relationships they formed in the course of repairing *Tzu Hang* in a Chilean navy yard. They extended and accepted hospitality wherever they went. For all their commitment to the ethic of self-reliance, they received an astonishing amount of help in their voyages. They bestowed and received as befits sincere worshippers of Zeus Xenios. They suggest a couple bent on personally reconnecting a civilization broken apart and demoralized by the war. The goal of one of their voyages, a demanding crossing to Japan, was simply to return the sword of a former Japanese general, which Miles had received from the general at the time of the surrender.<sup>27</sup>

For Moitessier, personal autonomy and the search for authenticity were paramount. He had a family, friends, and mentors; he respected the sailing community and its traditions; he acknowledged an obligation to “participate in creating the world.” But when the seagull heard the call of the open water, nothing else counted, “neither earth nor men.” For the Smeeton, it was their relationship that grounded all they did. Their adventures were the context for a richer life together. But the Smeeton also cherished their autonomy. As different from Moitessier as they seem, it is only a matter of emphasis. The task now is to examine how these two disparate, even to some extent contradictory, ends—autonomy and solidarity—can be held together in a single moral life.

## Integrity

Because integrity includes personal wholeness, it is the most problematic of the three demands of reason I have identified. At our present stage of civilization, there is no room for integrity. The pacifist must pay his taxes, though his taxes are used in part to prepare for or make war. Good citizenship and patriotism are also values for him. We value honesty, and we hate hypocrisy, but we know better than always to let the boss, or even our friends, know what we really think. We navigate between *Tartuffe* and the *Misanthrope*, and many valued activities

would become impossible if we did not. And this situation endangers the continued existence of life on the planet. We all know this, and we all, for the most part, acquiesce. One goes along to get along. Perhaps we are free to give up our pacifism and our concern for the culture, but they are part of us, woven into the emotional fabric of our character. Authentic commitment to the gestalt is impossible. A rigorously maintained system of watertight compartments saves us from despair.

From a psychological perspective, living with integrity is experienced as “optimal experience” or “flow.” Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the psychologist who first employed this concept, describes “the common characteristics of optimal experience” as

a sense that one’s skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult, or dangerous.<sup>28</sup>

One finds moments of this in Moitessier: “I have only been gone a month; my boat and I could have been sailing forever. Time stopped long ago. . . .”<sup>29</sup> In *Tamata and the Alliance*, he describes an extended period of timelessness. He recounts making a passage with Françoise from Tahiti to Alicante, Spain, via Cape Horn. After a period of storms, the weather became uncannily perfect. “Time,” he writes, “flowed like a peaceful river through four months of limitless horizons and space, with the high latitudes imprinted on our souls forever, the near-perfection of an immense journey pulled off without a hitch along a blazing wake in which the passage of time had ceased to exist.”<sup>30</sup> Moitessier had written about this voyage in *Cape Horn: the Logical Route*. In *Tamata* he laments his failure in his earlier book to capture this flowing period. He had, he said, just copied his log entries from that time. He writes: “I had scribbled those entries on the run, between putting in reefs, handling sail, recovering from days of fatigue and tension—in a word, everything involved in a sailing passage, whether long or short.”<sup>31</sup> The log entries reveal the competent seamanship that brought the boat to its destination. What they do not convey is something Moitessier calls “the third dimension—the only thing in writing that conveys anything real across

to the reader.”<sup>32</sup> They do not convey how these actions, places, and events can fill and fulfill an integral life.

Flow is often the focus of the surfer, the windsurfer, and, to a lesser extent, the dinghy sailor. James Whitehill describes this final stage of complete moral presence sailing his cat boat in the waters around Cape Cod. He approaches sailing as a Zen practice. He describes the moment of mastery: “In self forgetting interludes we shed the usual attitude or sense that it is ‘I’ who is sailing this boat. I and the boat are unified, without the habitual sharp physical, emotional, or cognitive separations and distinctions of ‘normal’ experience.”<sup>33</sup>

Steve Matthews, an Australian philosopher with a different sort of craft and with no background in Zen, nevertheless describes his own experience in very similar terms: “I am a windsurfer; windsurfing is part of my identity. Its value is, ironically, derived from the fact that, when I am immersed in the activity of sailing itself, I forget who I am, perhaps even that I am a windsurfer. For, especially at those moments of extreme concentration or (physical) effort, nothing but the experience itself is present to my mind. It is as if the memory cords linking me-now, carving across the face of a wave, to all else in the past, have been severed. My future self too seems cut off from the current experience.”<sup>34</sup>

One can enter the flow in almost any conditions. I have slipped into it while ghosting down the river, lying on my back in the cockpit, looking at the sky as the boat barely makes headway in the lightest of air. I have been thrown into it when caught by a microburst that hurled me down the river so decisively that I had no time to think or plan a response. Somehow I just went with it, and the boat and I came through. The paradigm for me, however, is captured in a photograph.

I am running downwind in a fresh breeze. The wind and tide are aligned so the water is fairly flat. I am looking back so that I can feel the wind on my face and determine its direction precisely. The tack has its risks: a dangerous broach if I bring the boat too much onto the wind; an even more dangerous jibe if I bring the stern around too far the other way. But I have sailed the boat a lot, and I understand the virtues of its simple unstayed mast—the most important being that I can depower the sail at any point, even on this tack. With the sheet—the line controlling the sail—in my right hand, I negotiate the boat’s relationship to the wind. With the tiller in my left hand, I direct the boat through the water. A sailboat is interstitial, part watercraft, part aircraft; it exploits the different viscosities of the two media. I am the fulcrum of this site, positioned at the intersection of water and air, moving sheet and tiller to find that point at which



Figure 1. The author in his boat

the boat is happy. Time is irrelevant. Thought manifests itself directly as action. The task is clear: I am at one with it.

I love to sail this little boat in the river in front of my house. It is called a melonseed skiff. It takes me out beyond the brake lights and stop signs and gives me my freedom. It is only fourteen feet long and weighs around two hundred pounds. I do not need a car to trailer it or a marina to slip it. It lives in my garage, and I launch it using a dolly. It is modeled on a nineteenth-century workboat, the design of which was preserved by Howard Chapelle in *American Small Sailing Craft*.<sup>35</sup> In the days when sailing was part of the world of work and the iron genny was unknown, a boat had to be able to handle what came its way. This one can. It stands up to winds near thirty miles an hour, and I have survived stronger gusts. Though it has no engine, I can get home when the wind drops off because it is equipped with oars, and it rows like a shell. The spars are wood. If I break the sprit, I make another out of a closet pole. It is paid for and, being easily maintained, costs me near nothing to keep. Melonseed sailing is autonomy itself.

I chose the boat out of a long-standing fascination with traditional sailing craft and the lore of seamanship that they embody. The simplicity of the rig, the robustness of the design, and its rowability made it a good choice for a sailor wanting to preserve his autonomy. The choice also declared my solidarity with tradition and with a community of like-minded persons. I met the builder, Roger Crawford, who has survived the ups and downs of the boatbuilding business, making over four hundred of these little boats in his one-man shop in Humarock, MA. A community of melonseed sailors keeps connected via an Internet discussion board. There are several annual regattas and many other smaller gatherings. They are held in beautiful natural settings—Cape Cod, Crystal Lake, coastal South Carolina—and foster a wonderful sense of connection to the natural world, to sailing tradition, to the art of small-boat seamanship, to this particular boat, and to the present company. This boat brought me to the best of friends. Melonseed sailing is solidarity itself.

In the optimal experience, personal autonomy and solidarity with the world hold together seamlessly. Because the boat and the act of sailing fit so perfectly my sense of what is right and meet, I suffer no cognitive dissonance—“self-consciousness disappears.” The constraints of wind and wave, notions of seamanship and tradition, and the character of the boat are the “goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing.” In the optimal experience, these become a world in which I am completely at home. All that is alien to the task at hand vanishes as “there is no attention left over” for it. Even if fleeting, these moments of flow are deeply satisfying. They do more than re-create us for the daily grind; they are the point of the search for provender.

## Conclusion

Sailing is an exploratory way of meeting the existential challenge of existing as a rational being. Rational beings strive for personal autonomy. We give reasons for our views and listen to the reasons of others in implicit recognition of the social function of reasoning. We value integrity, which is ideally the perfect alignment of understanding and practice.

Sailors may never consciously consider this function of their sport. To posit its existence, however, seems to me to throw helpful light on sailing and on sports in general. The different forms of sailing emphasize different aspects of the requirements of rationality. Ocean sailors and long-distance cruisers tend to

stress autonomy. Not that they deny the other values, but their emphasis is elsewhere: on proving oneself to oneself, developing the will, courage, and competence necessary for self-reliance, in short, gaining what Richard Hutch has called “moral presence.”<sup>36</sup> Sailors of this sort seek space to express an autonomous self, and they accept the challenges that develop it. Club racers and racers in one-design classes often focus on solidarity in the form of friendship, camaraderie, team spirit, the fellowship of competition mediated by sportsmanship, and the recognition of others. Windsurfers and day sailors tend to emphasize integrity in the form of flow, or loss of self, in the consuming activity.

A philosophical definition of sports has proven elusive. This is not surprising if sports function to address the three-dimensional challenge of rationality as I have described it. The ideal is complex, and there are logical as well as practical tensions that defy easy unification. Autonomy requires reflection; flow forbids it. Solidarity straddles the fence. Sports do not function simply as means to a univocal goal like winning or entertainment. Each one is a negotiated practical equilibrium point in the inherently unstable relationship between the demands of rationality.

It might be possible to construct a typology of sports, sorting them according to where they fall on the axis of each of these dimensions. Team sports are high on solidarity, lower on autonomy; marathon running and mountain climbing are the reverse. Surfing would be a paradigm of a flow-focused sport, a category that might also include downhill skiing and darts. Neither autonomy nor solidarity seem important to these. Are hiking and camping high on autonomy or driven by a concern for solidarity with nature? What is the relation between competition and autonomy or solidarity? The typology might be refined by distinguishing the various elements of autonomy and the different levels of solidarity and sorting activities further according to how they emphasize or downplay these subcomponents.

One necessary condition to calling an activity a sport is that a person can walk away from it. One can choose not to take part, or having chosen to take part, one can give up or opt out. Those forced to fight in gladiatorial combats were not engaged in a sport. Any time after leaving the Golden Globe race, Moitessier could have left off his voyage. Years later he did return to France. But he pushed at the limit of the notion of sports when he made sailing a way of life, a world, a path to salvation. Jon Krakauer, in his best-seller *Into the Wild*, tells about a version of this story but one with a different ending. The protagonist of the tale, Chris McCandless, made living rough and close to the earth his path



to salvation. He not only chose the path, he also repeatedly chose to restrict his ability to choose differently in the future. He gave away his money, buried his possessions, hid his whereabouts from potential helpers. Here we have left the realm of sports and entered the adjacent but distinct realm of deep play.

Some sports tempt with this totalizing possibility: they open up a way of life and a pathway to salvation. Sailing is one of these. Different sports, or even different approaches to a given sport, can highlight different aspects of the autonomy, solidarity, flow constellation. Those who want more than glimpses, those who want the whole of life and who insist on their integrity, push the concept of sports to its limit. In refusing to return to the set-up, they transcend both the set-up and the bounds of ready-made sports. Theirs is play in its strongest form. Moitessier and the Smeeton start from different places, but they can be understood as heading toward the same ultimate goal—integrating the rational demands of autonomy and solidarity. Perhaps this is the root of all sports. How to accommodate coherently autonomy and solidarity in the citizen is the fundamental question of political philosophy. How the artist creates something new within the artistic tradition he or she inhabits and how authentic religious belief is possible within a received tradition are domain-specific versions of the same problem.

#### NOTES

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14. Moitessier, *Tamata and the Alliance*.

15. Moitessier, *The Long Way*, 6.

16. *Ibid.*, 41.

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29. Moitessier, *The Long Way*, 17.

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32. *Ibid.*

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