

Stanely, Hiram M.

Mountain Climbers and the Perception of Distance

*Science*

N.S. Vol. II, No. 51, December 20, 1885

To the Editor of Science:

I do not know that the attention of psychologists has been sufficiently called to the experience of mountain climbers as bearing on the problem of the perception of distance. Both Sir Martin Conway in his recent book, *The Alps from End to End*, and M. Bonvald in his book, *Across Tibet*, have some suggestive remarks of the same tenor on this subject, but I will only quote those of M. Bonvald, as they seem on the whole the most pertinent.

Speaking of the highlands of Tibet, he says:

it is difficult to imagine how hard it is to find one's way among these highlands, where a man loses all sense of perspectives, his eye wandering over immense spaces without seeing at a give distance, either trees, houses, human beings, animals, or edifices of the height of which is known to him. It is by the incessant and unconscious comparison of such objects as these that he has learned to form an idea of distance. Here in the desert we have in a few weeks lost this sense of distance which we had gained by the experience of our lifetime. All that one sees is so alike; one hills is like another; according to the time of day a frozen pool either sparkles in the sun or disappear, so that one does not know whether it is large or small; a little bird fluttering its wings upon a clod of earth looks a wild animal which has been lying down and is getting up; a crow flying away with its prey in the morning mist seems to be a gigantic condor carrying off a lamb in its crows, while at the sunset this same crow, clearing itself on the summit of a rock, looks the size of a yak or a bear.

It is plain from this experience that M. Bonvald happened upon a new spatial world of size and distance, which he had to learn by a method of local visual signs, just as in his infancy he learned the space world of the nursery room. It would be interesting to inquire of such travelers the exact nature of the signs they used in constructing the new space world.