This revealing collection of essays probes the philosophical mysteries of sailing, looking for the wisdom we can glean from this ancient craft. It digs more deeply into the meaning and value of the sport than do how-to books or travel/adventure accounts. Contributors include philosophers, academics from other disciplines, and others intimately involved in the sport. All share an abiding interest in sailing and the belief that it teaches profound life lessons to those who sail. They articulate the intense engagement people have with sailing craft and with the many different forms that sailing takes.

This book will enhance sailors’ appreciation, and enrich their experience, of the sport. At the same time, philosophers will discover thought-provoking examples of the way that philosophical reflection comes to life when it is applied to the concrete activities to which people commit themselves.

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Catching the Drift of Why We Sail
Foreword by John Rousmaniere

Series Editor: Fritz Allhoff

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SAILING
PHILOSOPHY FOR EVERYONE
Catching the Drift of Why We Sail

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This welcome collection of essays about the examined life under sail touches many of my nerve endings. A topic I call “the meaning of the boat” has been high on my agenda for many years, and I have long been fascinated by the passionate connection that so many of us feel with boats and the sea. Who reading this does not agree or at least sympathize with E. B. White’s declaration, “With me, I cannot not sail”? For most sailors, this intense engagement is much more than a mere intellectual decision. It is a transforming connection between mind and heart, thought and belief, boat and sea.

This is what Joseph Conrad referred to when he wrote of “our fellowship in the craft and the mystery of the sea” in his seafaring memoir, The Mirror of the Sea, one of the crucial texts of meaning-of-the-boat studies. Here is a fine match: craft (what might be called “the physics of sailing”) and mystery (“the metaphysics of sailing”). Craft we all know – or at least we know we should know. It is the skills and equipment needed to get a boat from one place to another. Mystery, however, is a little more complex.

Recently, during a panel discussion of an upcoming race across the Atlantic, the moderator, Gary Jobson, asked me to describe my most vivid memory of transatlantic sailing. I could have mentioned the thrill of starting a race to Spain, or exuberant days of fast running before westerly gales in seas seemingly as high as the boat was long. Stretching the subject a little, I might have said something about a brutal beat out to Fastnet Rock in a force-ten storm, or carefully skirting Bermuda’s reef after four days at sea, sailing the boat like a dinghy as we fought to win a Newport Bermuda Race. I might well have recalled many of those
memories of great excitement, but, somewhat to my surprise, my mind went immediately to an altogether different moment.

Deep into a moonless night during my first long Atlantic voyage, a perfect calm enveloped the big ketch. The skipper came on deck, took a look around, and cut the engine. He didn’t have to explain why; we understood. The boat carried her way for a few minutes as the bow wave trickled into silence, and our little world was inhabited by stillness. The only sound was the occasional flutter of empty sails or confused birds. The single sign of reckoning time was the slow march of constellations across the great dome of darkness overhead. We could have been anywhere, at any moment.

After a while – I can’t say how long because minutes and hours were abstractions – someone switched on the spreader lights, and we tiptoed to the rail and peered down many fathoms into the clear, magical sea. Suspended between those two worlds in that moment, decades ago, I felt more connected to the eternal mysteries than any prayer or song or poem has ever allowed.

I am reminded of this magical moment by a photograph on my study wall. An anonymous sailor, his back to us, stands on the deck of a sailboat becalmed on a still dawn, peering ahead at the rising sun. Is he searching for land? For wind? Or for himself?

FIGURE F.1 Photo used by permission of Mystic Seaport.
Many sailors of all levels of ability have told me that they have had similar moments afloat, when time stood still and they discovered another world. The mystery of the sea is shared by all sailors, even (perhaps especially) the most technically gifted masters of the craft. The man who took this photograph was one of the most successful ocean racing sailors who ever lived, Carleton Mitchell. The high naval official Samuel Pepys was taking a row on the Mediterranean in 1683 when he was overwhelmed by one of these moments. He later wrote in a journal, “I know nothing that can give a better notion of infinity and eternity than the being upon the sea in a little vessel without anything in sight but yourself within the whole hemisphere.” Pepys was no flake but a tough-minded inspector of warships whose outbursts (as anyone who has read his diary knows) tended to be sexual, not spiritual; yet on this day the sea took on a whole new meaning for him.

More than two hundred years later, a self-promoting New York City magazine editor and ocean sailor named Thomas Fleming Day explained why he founded a race to Bermuda in this way: “Sailors wanted to get a smell of the sea and forget for the time being that there is such a thing as God’s green earth in the universe.” In short, they were seeking another world. So was an exceptionally experienced English writer-sailor, Maurice Griffiths, who laid out his feelings upon heading out in a small cruising boat in these words:

I found my pulse beating with suppressed excitement as I threw the mooring buoy overboard. It seemed as if that simple action had severed my connection with the life on shore; that I had thereby cut adrift the ties of convention, the unrealities and illusions of cities and crowds; that I was free now, free to go where I chose, to do and to live and to conquer as I liked, to play the game wherein a man’s qualities count for more than his appearance.

A few years ago the champion long-distance racer Ellen MacArthur wrote in her log as she neared the finish of a solo transatlantic race:

I now feel so wonderfully in tune with the boat and the sea that I know I shall really miss this once the race is over. At night I watch the sun go down and in the morning the sky is there above me, a wonderful feeling of space and timelessness.

And a pioneer British ocean racer of the 1920s, George Martin, noted that there are times when, “except for the knowledge of contact with the deck, one seemed to have passed right out of the world.”
One point to make about these visions is that nobody should ever feel embarrassed to have them. Not only are they common – sometimes so much so as to be commonplace – but they are paths to valuable truths. In fact, they carry considerable philosophical weight. The adjective often applied to them is “numinous,” a term originated by Rudolph Otto (1869–1937), a German theologian and authority in the field of comparative religions. In his influential book *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto defined a numinous event as a non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self.8 That object might be called God or “the wholly other.” The experience of confrontation, the “mysterium tremendum,” inspires great awe, distance, humility, and even fear.

Two decades before Otto, the American philosopher and psychologist William James (1842–1910) described this engagement with the sacred slightly differently. Collecting reports of mystical states, he noted patterns. Some included a sense of déjà vu. In others, everything seemed to carry special meaning. A common theme was oneness with the absolute, which sometimes had a maritime setting; one of James’ sources described a mystical state in which he was “immersed in the infinite ocean of God.” James emphasized that, while these states may appear non-rational, they can influence and even team up with our thinking. Their existence, James wrote, “absolutely overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe.”9

A sailor living an examined life could do a lot worse than read up on William James. He is mentioned briefly in this volume in Chapter 10, but more really should be said about this great thinker and man who so well appreciated the call of the sea. James did a little sailing as a young man in Newport, and evidently learned something because he employed a clever nautical metaphor to make a point about one of his favorite causes, free will. How can human beings be automatons, he asked, if, when they are passengers in a sailboat, they freely volunteer to take the helm or help with the reefing when the wind comes up?10 James’ own sport of choice was mountain hiking. That and his own psychology and intellectual work gave him an intimate understanding of the needs and life of the thoughtful adventurer. He urged opening ourselves up to making choices, pushing aside dogmatic determinism, and trusting that feeling can be a reliable adjunct to thinking (all good options for sailors, I would say). Finding meaning and mental health in vigorous adventures, he propounded a notion familiar to any sailor who has ever been at one and the same time wet, worn out, and exhilarated (and what sailor hasn’t?): “It is indeed a
remarkable fact that sufferings and hardships do not, as a rule, abate the love of life; they seem, on the contrary, usually to give it a keener zest.”

The philosopher Charles Taylor has described James as “our great philosopher of the cusp,” explaining, “He tells us more than anyone else about what it’s like to stand in that open space and feel the winds pulling you now here, now there.” The analogy is apt; few people face more decisions than the typical sailor on an average day. Should we reef now? Tack now? Anchor here? Heave to? Do nothing? There is no room for indecisiveness or complacency either in William James or in the best-sailed boats.

I have long wondered whether James knew about the extraordinary Richard T. McMullen, a pioneer cruising sailor who was never happier than when things were toughest. He first headed out in 1850 and was still at it forty-two years later, when he died at the helm while singlehanding. In his collection of sea stories, Down Channel, first published in 1869, he laid down a personal philosophy of vigorous yacht cruising that he summarized in the phrase, “my hard sailing habits.” He loved a hard beat to windward in a strong breeze, an activity that he called “terrible but very grand.” McMullen memorably said of good sailing that it “is not unlike the pleasure human nature has invariably found in successfully gathering roses off thorns.” There may be the occasional bloody finger, but there are great rewards.

There is much in these pages to prove that the joy in nautical rose-picking and the old sense of mystery both remain alive among sailors. Nicholas Hayes, in Chapter 8, for instance, describes the second day in a typical Chicago to Mackinac race as “a day of transcendence and transformation. Sailors will tell you that every person who starts this race will finish as someone new.” Yet mystery and romance cannot suffice on their own. It has been wisely said that, in a boat at sea, “piety is no substitute for seamanship.” Romantics who have fallen in love with “the dream” head out with too little knowledge, and they and their rescuers suffer for it. The most famous example of inappropriate romance is the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. So incompetent a seaman that he bragged about it, he built himself a boat that was “fast as a witch” but utterly unseaworthy, and he drowned in it. We certainly don’t want to encourage more Shelleys by suggesting that all it takes to sail around the world (much less around the harbor) is one numinous experience.

Mystery and craft, feelings and intellect – they function at their best when they team up to work together. As Joseph Conrad, himself a consummate mariner, knew very well, a numinous experience is not at all
incompatible with competence and technology. In fact, they often nurture each other, making sailing even more of an obsession than it already is.

NOTES

4 John Rousmaniere, Berth to Bermuda: 100 Years of the World’s Classic Ocean Race (Mystic, CT: Mystic Seaport and Cruising Club of America, 2006), p. 17.
Why philosophize about sailing? Because people sail! Serious people – that is, people serious about life – pour their time and treasure into sailing. They drag their families into it, or abandon friends and family to do it. They even risk their lives. Why do they do this? Can there be any sense to it? Every activity is a possible subject for philosophical reflection, the more so the more deliberately and passionately the activity is pursued and the more demanding it is. Committed action pre-supposes goals, values, and meanings. These give it its structure. Philosophical reflection wants to explicate these goals, in order to comprehend them, to see how they hang together with one another and with the larger set of commitments that the actor shares with others, and, finally, to interpret them as a signpost pointing us toward wisdom. Philosophical reflection focuses attention on what matters in the activity and on the fit and finish of its implicit ideals. Connections with the larger human drama are made. Lines of improvement in the activity might be suggested. Meaning and value grow. The activity becomes a practice, with a code of conduct (perhaps unspoken), an unfolding tradition with recognizable heroes and reformers, a sense of camaraderie with others similarly engaged, and more or less formal modes of organization to protect it. And so it could be with sailing. Philosophical sailors have more fun sailing. Sailing becomes bigger for them and more real.

It might be, too, that sailing could add life to one’s philosophy. Do philosophers who sail find themselves liberated as philosophers? Do traditional categories take on a different appearance when viewed from “a place of perpetual undulation”?

Could seamanship under sail, a
species of practical wisdom with ancient roots, serve as a model for wisdom in general? Philosophy can help us grasp the meanings, aims, and satisfactions of sailing. Perhaps reflecting on sailing can also help us grasp the meanings, aims, and satisfactions of philosophy itself. Philosophers might find a path to more philos in their philosophy. Philosophy might become something bigger for them and more real. The reader will find suggestions to this effect in the essays that follow.

What is sailing? Traditionally, Socrates set the form of the fundamental philosophical question: *Ti esti?* – What is it? What is courage? What is piety? What is knowledge? What is love? For Socrates, the path to wisdom leads through questions of this form. He rejects mere examples as an answer. He wants a statement of the essence of justice. His way of constructing such a statement set the pattern for philosophical reflection ever since: one listens to how those around one use the term, maps what inferences are sanctioned by this use, and then tests the set for consistency. Theoretically, this process continues until no further inconsistencies appear. Breathe easily! None of the essays below takes this approach. It is worthwhile, however, to take a moment to consider the *ti esti* question with regard to our subject.

What is sailing really? Is there a timeless essence that can be put into words? I doubt it. Try something like “moving a boat through water by means of the wind.” Counterexamples will not be long in coming: ice-boating, windsurfing, sailing stones in Death Valley, an imagined spaceship harnessing solar winds, and so on. More importantly, even if we set aside these possible counterexamples, the definition will not be able to capture what sailing means to us now. The function of sailing has changed. Sailing vessels were once movers of goods and passengers, tools for the exploitation of fisheries, the only way to cross seas, and powerful weapons of war. Other machines have taken over these functions. Something other than the necessities of commerce and war prompt contemporary men and women to sail. Ignoring this different function would lump together practices that ought to remain distinct. It would put us at a level of abstraction at which something essential is lost. What then has sailing become? The genus “hobby” cannot contain it without remainder. A hobby is an activity done regularly in one’s leisure time for pleasure. While some sailors may be hobbyists, many are not. Sailing has its professionals as well as those strange birds the circumnavigators and long-term cruisers – people for whom sailing is not a leisure-time activity but the focus of their lives. The physical effort required in these more strenuous forms of sailing, as well as the risks
involved, sit uneasily with the ideas of pleasure and of toys or pursuits lacking seriousness, part of the connotation of “hobby.”

Sport, which the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines as “an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment,” does better perhaps. But, of course, sailing need not involve competition. This clause might be a mistake in the definition of sport since hunting and mountain climbing are universally considered to be sports but seldom involve competition. We might try looking inward for the competition in these cases, to some sort of self-overcoming, but this would be an unusual use of the word. The awful word “entertainment” also connotes an ultimate lack of seriousness that is inadequate to the circumnavigator or long-term cruiser as well as the hunter and the mountaineer. If these activities entertain, once again it must be in some very special sense of the word.

Many do call sailing a sport. The National Sailing Hall of Fame circulates a brochure that describes what the Hall is and what it does. On the second page of that document a statement by Walter Cronkite contains these sentences: “Baseball, basketball, football, tennis, soccer, golf and lacrosse all have halls of fame. I believe the sport of sailing should have a similar facility that will focus attention on our sport and recognize its heroes as role models for our youth.” On the whole, however, the National Sailing Hall of Fame, in this publication and on its website, uses the word “sport” very sparingly. In fact, the word “sport” occurs only two more times in the brochure. More often “the art of sailing” or “the science of sailing” are referred to. There is a gallery in the Hall of Fame dedicated to “The Spectacle of Sailing.” Well, is it also a sport?

This simple question takes us back full circle: What is sailing? And what is a sport? The first, we have seen, is not as straightforward to answer as one might hope. Even if we stipulate away the funky counterexamples and stick to boats moved by the wind, the second question cannot be answered unequivocally. In this sense, if you are racing sailboats you are sailing, and if you are cruising sailboats you are sailing. James Cook was sailing when he explored the South Pacific in *Endeavour*, and so was the previous master of that ship when he took it from Grimsby to Hull, delivering coal. If sailing is anything done to move a boat using the wind, then clearly at least some sailing is not a sport. Getting clear about what sailing means to us today may cut away Cook and the collier. It leaves other unclear cases like that of the long-term cruising couple. They are clearly sailing; are they engaged in a sport?
This little exercise is salutary. Concepts that we might otherwise deploy in a thoughtless and reified way are thematized – set in motion, so to speak – and, instead of bricks out of which to build a final answer, they become hypotheses that we must test continually against our own intellectual experience. We are freer now to philosophize, philosophy being, as Adorno has said, “thought in a perpetual state of motion.” To put it another way, philosophy is the attempt to think in a disciplined way about something when we don’t know exactly what it is we are thinking about. We cannot begin until we have realized that we don’t know. To ordinary consciousness this loss of certainty is a step backward. To the philosopher, and to the reflective sailor, it is progress; now one may begin.

There is another traditional philosophical question: What is the ultimate purpose of the thing in question? Aristotelians use the terms telos, or final cause, to name this motive. What is it that draws the soul to sailing? The four essays in Part I of this volume reflect on the fact that effort, uncertainty, and sometimes pain and danger are inescapable parts of sailing. If we are thinking in the direction of pleasure or entertainment, toward which the categories of hobby and sport would point us, then this is a particularly salient question for sailing: Where is the fun of it? If pleasure or entertainment is not the final goal, what is? How does one explain a pursuit that commits one to so much discomfort and even danger?

A common thread runs through the answers the first four essays give to these questions. Facing the uncertainty and the technical challenge of sailing can lead to self-knowledge and to increased virtue. One finds out what one is made of and, perhaps, takes heart, becoming more confident, more open to experience and more self-directed.

Jack Stillwaggon, in “Ships of Wood and Men of Iron,” recounts a voyage he took as a young man on a replica of Captain Bligh’s Bounty. Jack encountered considerable danger and discomfort and yet, despite the passage of years, this voyage has remained a high point in his life. Reflecting on this, Jack asks about the point of making such journeys: “Do we strive to experience the past as amateur historians or are we atoning for our frivolous modern lifestyle? Are we like the actor who takes up a political cause to prove he can do more than just play make-believe? Does the fact that we endured a risky trial and survived add importance to an otherwise silly existence?” His answer is that we face the perils of the sea in order to prove something to ourselves about our abilities and our personal worth. To face such a challenge successfully is life-changing. “Like the rock climber who maintains an inner
self-confidence because of having scaled challenging heights, or the marathon runner who completes a race, I was more at peace with myself for reaching new horizons and I expected more from myself from that point onward.”

In “Winning Philosophy,” Gary Jobson takes up the themes of courage and self-confidence from the perspective of a long and distinguished career racing sailboats. He describes the exhilaration and the anxiety of competition and offers tips for overcoming the latter. “Winning takes inner strength and even courage. The big question for every competitive sailor is how to generate the will to overcome fear and to win.” While Gary speaks directly from his long experience, using no philosophical vocabulary, his essay answers the question: What must I do to acquire the virtues I need to succeed at sailing? Strength of character and the power of self-transformation have been the aim of philosophical exercises since the beginning of philosophy. Gary’s essay links up in especially illuminating ways with the essay of Greg and Tod Bassham on stoicism and sailing and with the Aristotelian approach that Jesse Steinberg and Michael Stuckart take in their essay.

Crista Lebens, in “Hard a’ Lee,” agrees with Jack and Gary that the opportunity to face down danger and to win the respect of others is part of sailing’s allure. She sees this, however, as one element of a larger pursuit, the pursuit of eudaimonia. This ancient Greek word she translates as “human flourishing.” Perhaps it is Crista’s different sailing experience that gives her this perspective: “I have sailed almost exclusively in small craft on inland lakes with family and friends. I have raced in informal afternoon regattas that are about as competitive as a game of touch football in the park. The life lessons I have learned from sailing are drawn from my experiences of these enjoyable afternoons.” Themes of sociability, beauty, and enjoyment emerge here. They will be developed at length in Part III.

In “Solo Sailing as Spiritual Practice,” Richard Hutch rounds out this opening section on the motives and rewards of sailing with an analysis based on his own experience as an open-ocean sailor and on his study of the writings of a number of single-handed ocean sailors. Richard introduces the notion of “moral presence” and argues that this is what these sailors seek. They sometimes describe their goal in terms of personal quest (as we see in Jack’s essay), sometimes in terms of a cosmic quest, and sometimes as the pursuit of technical finesse. Richard shows how these varying self-descriptions describe different pathways to moral presence.
The confluence of the views in these four essays is striking. It is even more striking when one reflects on the very different experiences of sailing that ground them: a crewman on a square-rigger, high-level racing of dinghies and large-keel boats, clubbing on a C-Scow in Lake Michigan, and single-handed ocean sailing.

The essays of Part II develop this fundamental idea that sailing can be a pathway to moral fulfillment by looking at it through the lens of particular historical schools of philosophy.

Sailing his catboat is for James Whitehill a Zen practice. In “Buddha’s Boat,” he says that “Buddhist tradition holds the view that there are countless ways to the difficult goal of an awakened, flourishing self. Sailing, I believe, can be one of those ways or practices.” James describes how archery and meditation have been taught by traditional Zen practitioners as a means to enlightenment and then develops, out of his own carefully observed experience of sailing catboats around Cape Cod, an account of how he approaches sailing in a similar spirit.

In “Freedom of the Seas,” Greg and Tod Bassham find in the teachings of Cicero, Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and the Stoic school a guide to the most successful sailing. “For sailors,” they write, “Stoicism has much to offer as a means to create and sustain the sense of joy we seek in sailing.” They explain the Stoic metaphysics of fate and agency, the complementary virtues of cheerful resignation and self-sufficiency, and the all-important technique of negative visualization, and demonstrate their value for the sailor.

Steven Horrobin, in “Sailors of the Third Kind,” takes his inspiration from Spinoza, leading the reader on a metaphysical journey the goal of which is to break the hold on him or her of a substantialist view of things. A sailor of the third kind is one who recognizes that everything is process: not just the weather and the waves but persons, boats, everything. Citing Spinoza, Steven describes this person in process of becoming as “in essence a move of the universal super-process toward its own self-realization, with persons achieving greater or lesser moves toward representing, in themselves and their own being, an approximation of the whole.” For Spinoza, “the good was manifest in the direction of movement, within a person, toward the accurate reflection of the whole of nature, in microcosm.” Heavy stuff! But Steven connects it to his experience of a certain sort of sailing and of sailors he calls sailors “of the third kind.” Those who have perused the literature of ocean sailing, or who have much acquaintance with those who do such sailing, will recognize this sort of sailor at once. And, anyone who spends time maintaining a
boat will be moved by Steven’s eloquent depiction of the boat as a process unfolding in interaction with other surrounding processes.

The essays in Part III explore in detail various aspects of the “flourishing” or “fulfillment” to be found in sailing. In “What the Race to Mackinac Means,” Nicholas Hayes gives a compelling account of competing in the Chicago to Mackinac Island Race. His racers encounter natural beauty, camaraderie, “lessons about work, reward, luck, and injustice,” and a new sense of “our relationship with time.” “Everything is now,” says Nick near the end of his essay.

If it is not the same sort of consciousness, Nick’s “nowness” is closely related to the one that Steve Matthews unpacks in his essay on the phenomenon he calls “flow.” In “Sailing, Flow, and Fulfillment,” Steve draws on both Daoism and the work of contemporary psychologists to explain the special value he finds in sailing, and especially in the sort of sailing of particular interest to him, windsurfing. Here, I think, specific features of the “boat” are important. Steve emphasizes the tight connection between the windsurfer and his board, a feeling of oneness with the kit.

Though I feel something similar in sailing my small skiff in a fresh breeze, it is very different sailing my five-ton yawl. There the feeling is more one of sovereignty. Set the course, trim the sails, and, once the boat is comfortable, set the tiller pilot and step back. The joy in this sort of sailing arises from the felt difference between the boat and me. The boat is an orderly world and I am its contemplating spirit. This contemplation does have an “everything is now” aspect to it, but for me at least it also has a time-soaked quality. When I sail, I feel the continuity with a long tradition. These differences in the experiences of various sorts of sailing are worth noting. We must not pull our conceptual nets too taut, lest we arrest “the motion of thought/and its restless iteration.”

Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza, Luísa Gagliardini Graça, and José Jáuregui-Olaiz, in “On the Crest of the Wave,” rhapsodize on many of the themes touched on in this book. They make playful use of common expressions with roots in the sailing world in order to evoke, as well as describe, the special aesthetic aspects of sailing. Slocum, Gautier, MacArthur, and other heroic sailors are brought in to testify to the natural beauty encountered in sailing, awe in the face of the sublime, the cultivated beauty of boats and of the precise and pertinent motions of the practiced sailor, and the joy of the constrained freedom in seamanship.

Jesse Steinberg and Michael Stuckart, in “Navigating What is Valuable and Steering a Course in Pursuit of Happiness,” the final essay in this section, consider practical, moral, and aesthetic values as they relate to sailing.