



Unaccustomed Subsistence

In the bad old days, as we are told, a man could be hanged for stealing a loaf of bread. Even today, people in civilised countries can be shot dead for stealing, no questions asked, even if they may be desperate for food and water, as in a disaster situation.

The perception of whether punishing post-disaster looters is right or wrong depends on your point of view. Businesses reasonably want their assets protected by legal force. The wider citizenry will tend to agree, fearful for their own property and security, in case people on the street start taking the law into their own hands, threatening a more general anarchy.

On the other hand, a disaster survivor desperate for food or water will, from their own point of view, reasonably take the things they need, putting their very material survival ahead of abstract laws or lofty principles. Like the starving person stealing a loaf, they hardly have any other choice: the immediate need to survive outweighs the risk of any punishment – even the rather severe one of summary execution.

In these unaccustomed life and death situations, such as in the case

of a natural disaster, breaking the law to preserve life must be considered justifiable. After all, laws are put in place to serve human purposes – they are not ends in themselves. And, in an emergency situation, those laws do not necessarily serve their proper purpose: in effect, normal rules just don't apply.

Temporarily suspending the rules may seem suspiciously self-serving, but this is exactly what civil authorities themselves do in extraordinary circumstances. In such cases, even normally liberal-democratic governments may sometimes help themselves to abnormally draconian powers, by declaring a state of emergency, dishing out summary justice, and generally leaving human rights aside for a more convenient time. So the normal 'rules of engagement' change, with both the authorities and the citizens taking abnormal liberties in order to cope.

An Over-riding Urge

In general, hunger must be one of the most fundamental motivators for human behaviour, not only in terms of ordinary subsistence, but in spurring some of the more extreme – and risky – actions, such as hunting and killing other animals, or stealing other people's produce, in order to subsist.

A shipwreck survivor, washed ashore on some strange island, would have to satisfy the basic need to eat, over and above the need to seek some sort of shelter. This would mean the need to venture out, in the hope of finding food, in doing so risking some degree of exposure (and the possibility of

being eaten oneself instead).

And so in the unusual tale of Marc Simian, the shipwrecked monkey, having found himself a little hut for his new island home, now ventures out among the surrounding allotments to get himself some food.

Amidst the vegetation he soon finds plenty of nice things to eat: some ripe looking berries, which are rapidly plucked and consumed; some delicious apples hanging down from the branches of an apple tree; and some lovely fresh peas in their pods: sweet and crisp, and not at all like the starchy, mushy variety of pea he had guessed must be native in these parts. Having not eaten anything since being shipwrecked, he devours all these gratefully, feeling much more satisfied with his place in the world.

His hunger makes him eat quickly, and without much caution. He knows that the fruits he is consuming belong to someone else. That is, they are owned – within the human frame of reference – by some particular humans. And, having spent a large part of his life in human society – in the company of a ship's crew – he is aware that his act of consumption would be considered, among humans, as stealing.

Of course, in the wider scheme of things, the fruit and vegetables could be regarded as products of Nature; and a monkey might feel entitled to eat them as much as any bird, beast or insect. But he knows that if he wishes to be treated humanely, he has to abide as far as possible by human laws – even if, as he well knows, humans themselves don't obey them all the time. On balance,

though, his personal emergency situation overrides any ethical objections to breaking the rules, and so he is prepared to risk transgression now, and work out the philosophical justification later.

Labour and Reward

It has to be said that M. Simian is not used to manual work. But for now, at least, he has easy pickings. All of Nature's harvest is readily at his disposal: there seem to be no natural barriers or competitors in his way. Of course, the invisible rules of human society, and generations of human control of other species, have been promoting and protecting the crops – at least until his own unexpected arrival – so that they make such a profitable harvest. So although Nature supplied the raw materials, in the form of the seeds, soil and water, it is human labour that has added most of the value in having such big, tasty, pest-free products grouped conveniently together in one bountiful supply.

In other words, it is the pre-invested human labour that makes the monkey's work so light. He bears no cost other than the effort of picking the fruits, and the energy required to chew and digest them – a good return in the circumstances. He has perhaps the nicest, simplest relationship between labour and reward: the more effort he puts in, the more he gains to consume – until eventually, he has satisfied his belly. Around this point, the effort of eating seems no longer worthwhile. He returns to his hut for a well-earned rest, and perhaps some philosophical reflections on social justice and the rights to consumption

of natural resources.

However, it is not long before other cravings start to kick in. He could still really use a cigarette. But cigarettes, as we know, don't grow on trees...

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