



Simian in Civilisation

„Hell is other people, said Jean-Paul Sartre, and if baboons were philosophers no doubt they would say that hell is other baboons.“ - Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*.

Social animals have to put up with many annoyances that solitary animals do not have to worry about. As Steven Pinker has pointed out, these include theft, cannibalism, cuckolding, infanticide, extortion and other kinds of treachery. But that is just the start. Social animals also have to suffer boring conversations, petty jealousies, societal obligations, guilt trips, other people not doing the washing up, and the suppression of natural inclinations towards, sloth, lust and gluttony.

Being a social animal must have its benefits, and indeed it does: apart from the intrinsic appeal of sociability (and perhaps the chance of more sex), a social animal can expect some degree of protection from being in a group, some degree of social welfare, and generally a share in the benefits of collective bounty, resources and hard-earned advances that one could not hope to achieve on one's own. Without society, as Thomas Hobbes famously asserted, we would live in a ‚state of nature‘ not unlike

an animal in the wild, with a life that was ‚solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short‘.

Marc Simian, although a monkey, is neither nasty nor brutish. Indeed, having been a member of a ship's crew, he is comfortable in human society, accepting its rules and rewards. Having been shipwrecked, however, he started off in England pennilessly poor, but has managed to appropriate some money. And having been solitary for a while - living on an allotment - he has come to town, and with the help of the money is spending an agreeable evening in an inn.

Because of society, there is a general expectation that people will behave in civilised and predictable ways towards each other. As a stranger, therefore, Simian is not threatened with violence when he enters the inn, a building built and owned by someone else. And since he is able to speak English, he is able to establish communication with the landlord of the inn. Simian gives the man some coins, and gets in return a jar of ale.

In inns as in society, people are always exchanging thoughts, ideas and stories, as well as favours, money and jars of ale. Society is built on exchange, trust and reciprocity. Language plays a role in cementing these, as it allows sharing experience and ideas between the whole group, and it is the solidarity of the group in enforcing collective codes of conduct that allows the whole thing to work. Because of this, Marc can get along peaceably with his fellow drinkers in the bar. Even though they are strangers - of another species

- he is not in constant fear of being cheated, beaten, killed and eaten.

While humans may evolutionarily be social animals, we evolved in a context of small groups where everyone was either related to each other, or at least, everyone knew everyone else. In such groups, trust and reciprocity was relatively easily maintained. But this expectation of trust and reciprocity would not extend outside the group. So, the presence of strangers could mean exposure to danger. Who is to say that that bunch of club-wielding bipeds on the horizon are hollering in recognition of their fellow hominids, or are rejoicing in anticipation of catching lunch?

The advent of larger and denser human populations - beyond the size of a small group - led to a situation where there were large numbers of strangers all around. Overcrowded fixed settlements brought not only pollution, contamination and diseases, but stress, psychosis and violence. So, more elaborate social codes were required to moderate relations between people whose natural inclinations were to kill any strangers, and use up what the environment had to offer locally before moving on.

Conventionally, cities have been associated with civilisation, more or less in a definitive sense. This might be interpreted as if cities somehow bequeathed us with the gift of civilisation, somehow making us better people. But from another point of view, civilisation only made us better adapted to living packed together in cities - a bit of a circular argument. In this sense, civilisation enabled cities, rather than the other way around.

If you live completely alone in the wilderness, then you can do anything you wish. You can stay in bed all day, and not do any washing up, ever. You can shout and curse, burp, scratch yourself, and do any number of things that might annoy other people. You don't need to have a bath. You can throw the rubbish out the window, without angry neighbours complaining to you or the council. You can dance naked around your house, and no one will be outraged. You can habitually use your garden as a toilet, without fear of reducing house prices in the neighbourhood.

Take any person and put them in the complete isolation of the wilderness, and will they not be tempted to do at least a few of these things? It is not so much that some people are more civilised than others. Rather, some behaviour is more civilised than other behaviour, according to the circumstances. (As an allotment tenant, Marc knows not to leave discarded plants on other people's plots, but as a monkey, he reserves the right to scratch his own testicles, at least when no-one else is around).

Accustomed as he is to human civilisation, our Simian spends a convivial evening in the company of strangers in the inn, talking about the weather, listening to the latest news, and local gossip. He manages to avoid spilling any jars of ale, or insulting any of the locals, or getting in any fights. In this case, the mechanism of civilisation protects him from the local humans, just as it protects them from each other. Whereas in other circumstances, civilisation can be barbaric to other civilisations, the

important thing is that once he is safely inside this civilisation, he is as safe from treachery and cannibalism as anyone else. Indeed, in some respects he is safer here than if he were in the company of strangers of his own species. For tonight at least, hell is not necessarily other people.

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