

“Robinson Crusoe”

Let us consider the Robinson Crusoe example: the castaway goes about providing for himself. His initial efforts are directed toward immediate satisfaction of the food requirements which could not await fulfillment through the more “roundabout” techniques.

But having established procedures to assure the continuance of the economic process with the tools and materials at hand, he notes that more fish may be acquired by the use of a net, and more goats may be brought to hand with a trap. He sets about providing these instruments.

Now in the classical example, it is supposed that he needs to save or accumulate fish and goat-meat in sufficient quantities to support him while he constructs the new equipment. And toward this end, it is further supposed that to accomplish the new techniques Crusoe must eat fewer fish in case he is already fully employed, or work longer hours in case the initial techniques have not required his full energies.

What activates Crusoe? What determines his choice to build the new devices and use the new techniques? Is it that he calculates the pain and abstention involved in making traps and nets? Is making nets more painful than grabbing fish with the bare hands?

The simple fact is that Crusoe envisions (invents) more efficient procedures, and that his present rate of production permits him to adopt them. In case he is presently “fully” employed in hourly surviving, Crusoe makes choices toward efficiency quite as well as if his present techniques provided surfeit. For example, he will fish the lee side of a bar rather than the windward side in case fish are more abundant on the protected side. It is inconceivable that there could be no choices even in this reductio ad absurdum example. It is true that the more efficient his current techniques are, the more opportunity he has to experiment with new devices and procedures. But this is merely a differentiation in degree, not in kind. In either case he merely adopts the more efficient techniques in the technological sense. If he did not act in this manner, he would be universally regarded as insane. In fact, in the traditional story, if he did not act on the basis of technological efficiency, he would cease to be regarded at all because he would cease to exist.

There is one circumstance in which Crusoe is not judged to be insane if he acts otherwise than on the basis of technological efficiency: the circumstance of Crusoe’s harboring taboos. In this case, those who hold the same taboos might consider Crusoe a hero and paragon of wisdom even though--or even because--his resistance to technological progress results in his very destruction. Those who do not hold the same taboos might consider Crusoe deluded and misguided, and they might even think him vicious, but they would not label him insane. To them, Crusoe may be the subject of evangelistic efforts or he may be the object of warlike expeditions, but he would not be considered a fit incumbent of insane asylums. His sanity comes into question only when he displays conceptual inability to apprehend technological processes. This would be obvious, for example, if he tried to catch fish on the dry sand dunes instead of in the water.

Action on the basis of mana and taboo does not involve inability to apprehend technological processes, and so, does not involve insanity. But it should be noted that action on the basis of mana and taboo, as such, does have the same incidence as insane action. The only difference between the two is that the insane act is the result of inability, whereas the mana or taboo act is the result of unwillingness. Their incidences are identical. action based either way attains efficacy only by accident. It becomes apparent that, even in the Robinson Crusoe situation, the real locus of meaning and efficacy is in the technological processes and not in any system of apriorist propriety formulations.
