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Author(s): Maximillian É. Novak
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Robinson Crusoe’s “Original Sin”

MAXIMILLIAN E. NOVAK

During the past forty years, the critical interpretation of Defoe’s fiction has become increasingly involved in economic theories. Critics such as Gustav Hübener, Brian Fitzgerald, and Ian Watt have applied the principles of Marx, Max Weber, and R. H. Tawney to Crusoe’s island so often that it has become commonplace to suggest that the real key to Defoe lies in an understanding of capitalism and economic individualism.¹ There can be no doubt that there is an economic problem in Robinson Crusoe; the opening pages present a clear conflict between the hero and his father on the question of Crusoe’s future profession and social status. But the exact nature of this problem has been obscured by ignoring two important points: Crusoe’s fictional character and Defoe’s economic ideas. Throughout his narrative, Crusoe is aware of a terrible “original sin” against his father and God—a sin which he regards as the direct cause of all his sufferings. I want to suggest that Crusoe’s sin is his refusal to follow the “calling” chosen for him by his father and that the rationale for this action can be found in Crusoe’s personal characteristics: his lack of economic prudence, his inability to follow a steady profession, his indifference to a calm bourgeois life, and his love of travel.

Crusoe gives an excellent sketch of his character toward the end of the second volume. Abandoned by his mutinous crew at Bengal, he has entered into partnership with a hard-working merchant whose plodding, diligent character Crusoe finds a direct contrast to his own:

But my Fellow Traveller and I, had different Notions; I do not name this, to insist upon my own, for I acknowledge his were the most just and the most suited to the end of a Merchant’s Life; who, when he is abroad upon Adventures, ’tis his Wisdom to stick to that as the best Thing for him, which he is like to get the most Money by: My new Friend kept himself to the Nature of the Thing, and would have been content to have gone like a Carrier’s

Horse, always to the same Inn, backward and forward, provided he could, as he call'd it, *find his Account in it*; on the other Hand, mine was the Notion of a mad rambling Boy, that never cares to see a Thing twice over. It is not surprising that the Crusoe who describes himself as a "mad rambling Boy" has been ignored by recent critics, since it is hardly his entire character. When his partner reproaches him for his lack of ambition and avarice, Crusoe retorts, "Once I conquer my backwardness, and embark heartily; as old as I am, I shall harass you up and down the World, till I tire you; for I shall pursue it so eagerly, I shall never let you lye still" (III, 112).

This conversation to the "Principles of Merchandising" is, as usual, short-lived, but the character which Crusoe gives of himself in this section is certainly the best glimmer of self-knowledge which he presents to the reader. Considerations of Crusoe as the average Englishman, everyman, economic man, or as a self portrait of Defoe have tended to obscure his real personality, for Crusoe is a prototype of Shaw's Bluntschli—the hero raised as a tradesman but with a romantic temperament. Whenever he finds himself compelled to work, he is talented enough to succeed, but as Crusoe reminds us, he was "possesst with a wandring Spirit" (III, 80), which would never let him remain in one spot for very long. This, of course, is why his punishment is so appropriate. To be abandoned on an island for twenty-eight years was even more of a torture for the restless Crusoe than for most men.

Although an awareness of Crusoe's restlessness and desire for travel provides an insight into his reason for leaving his father's house, it does not explain why he regarded this act as his "original sin." This problem was as puzzling to a contemporary critic like Charles Gildon as it has been for the moderns. Gildon suggested that Defoe was trying to insult the English navy, Paul Dottin appealed to the power of the father in puritan homes, while Ian Watt has argued that Crusoe's sin was "really the dynamic tendency of capitalism itself" and part of his desire to improve his economic status. None of these explanations is entirely satisfactory. The opening remarks in the debate between Crusoe and his father involve a problem of economic or social class, but there

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is little indication that Crusoe is trying to improve his economic status. If that were his intention, Crusoe would have to be foolish indeed if the strong arguments of his father did not convince him that the steady road of middle-class life was the best way to wealth and happiness.

Crusoe's father attempts to win his son over by appealing to his self-interest. He tells Crusoe that the life of a man firmly rooted in the middle class is happy because it is safe and comfortable; whereas the life of an adventurer usually resulted in either poverty or, if successful, the discontent and luxury of the upper classes:

He told me . . . that these things were either too far above me, or too far below me; that mine was the middle State, or what might be called the upper Station of Low Life, which he had found by long Experience was the best State in the World, the most suited to human Happiness, not exposed to the Miseries and Hardships, the Labour and Sufferings of the mechanick Part of Mankind, and not embarrass'd with the Pride, Luxury, Ambition and Envy of the upper Part of Mankind . . . .

He bid me observe it . . . that the middle Station had the fewest Disasters, and was not expos'd to so many Vicissitudes as the higher or lower Part of Mankind; . . . not embarrass'd with the Labours of the Hands or of the Head, not sold to the Life of Slavery for daily Bread, or harrass with perplex'd Circumstances, which robe the Soul of Peace and the Body of Rest . . . . (I,2)

Of course this is not only good economic advice, it is also the counsel of age to youth. But it is not the kind of appeal which will move Crusoe, who is indifferent to comfort and whose head is filled with thoughts of travel and adventure.

Eventually Crusoe comes to regard his life as a “memento” of God's revenge upon a man who leaves his station, disobeys his parents, and abandons his calling. But is his desire to go to sea so unreasonable? And how practical were his father's plans to establish him as a lawyer or tradesman? Even Gildon found this puzzling, for we never learn anything about Crusoe's prospects except for his father's guarantee that he would be comfortably provided for if he remained in the “middle station” of life. Since the way to wealth in the seventeenth century was either through trade or the law, these are important considerations in determining his motives in refusing to accept the position in life chosen for him

*Robinson Crusoe Examin'd*, p. 83.
by his father. There seems little doubt that by applying himself to either of these professions Crusoe would have become wealthy.5 He vaguely suggests that he wanted to raise his fortune, but as his father clearly points out, the sea was only for those of great wealth or of "desperate Fortunes" (I, 2). The dreams of riches from sea adventures had faded with Raleigh in the Tower. Thus any suggestion that Crusoe's main interest was to improve his condition in life seems to confuse the restlessness of the capitalist with the restlessness of the wanderer.6 Dottin was at least partially correct in arguing that "Defoe's intention was to represent a rash and inconsiderate boy, unable to resist the strong impulse that urged him to a seafaring life."7

But Dottin failed to realize that Crusoe's behavior involved a sin against a specific religious-economic doctrine. Some similar historical examples will be illuminating in this case. Richard Norwood, the first surveyor of Bermuda (1616), who ran away from home to go to sea, was haunted with remorse about his disobedience to his parents and his failure to follow the calling they selected for him. He became angry when a minister told him that the evils which had befallen him at sea were the result of his failure to follow his calling, but in his meditations he upbraided himself for having "forsaken the calling wherein my parents had placed me and betaken myself to another course of life without any due calling or encouragement from God or men."8 And Cotton Mather in a tract on the execution of twenty-six pirates moralizes chiefly on their disobedience to their parents in failing to follow the calling that was chosen for them. Among the more repentant pirates was John Browne, who testified to the folly of rebelling against one's parents. "Stay in your Place & Station Contentedly," he advised the reader.9

Crusoe's concern with disobeying his father's advice follows.

6The economic historian, Thomas Ashton, observed that Robinson Crusoe was the "epic of the ordinary man" during the eighteenth century because it inspired both the urge to go to sea which made England a great naval power and the interest in inventions which produced the Industrial Revolution. See An Economic History of England: the 18th Century (London, 1955), p. 105.
7Robinson Crusoe Examin'd, p. 152.
the same pattern. Boarding a ship for London, he is confronted by two storms, and although he is a passenger, Crusoe is forced to labor at the pumps, where he faints from fright. He narrates his salvation as a kind of miracle and persists in viewing these tempests as punishment for his sin and the fulfillment of his father’s prediction that God would not bless him and that he would have leisure to repent when it was too late. Although Crusoe’s father was merely prophesying his son’s future, his words have the operative power of a curse; Crusoe never forgets them. “I began now seriously to reflect upon what I had done, and how justly I was overtaken by the Judgment of Heaven for my wicked leaving my Father’s House, and abandoning my Duty,” he remarks after his first misadventure, “all the good Counsel of my Parents, my Father’s Tears and my Mother’s entreaties came now fresh into my Mind; and my Conscience . . . reproached me with the Contempt of Advice, and the Breach of Duty to God and my Father” (I, 7). Crusoe’s reaction might seem extreme to the modern reader, but it reveals the same connection between the will of God and the will of the parent in the choice of an occupation as we have already seen in Norwood’s and Mather’s reflections on this subject.

From these examples it might be expected that the doctrine of the calling was always used to invoke obedience, but Weber and Tawney have argued that Luther’s concept of the Beruf eventually became a formative influence in the development of economic individualism and capitalism. As developed by Luther this doctrine was associated with a rigidly stratified society and with the sanctification of work. Both of these ideas appear in a poem by the sixteenth-century poet Robert Crowley, who warned the merchant that he would be “damned eternally” if he attempted to raise himself or his son to a higher station in life:

For in the worlde ther can not be
More greate abomination,
To thy Lord God, then is in the
Forsakeyng thy vocation.10

Long before 1719, the year that Robinson Crusoe was first published, protestant sects had changed Luther’s doctrine into a proof of salvation by works or, more specifically, work. Since he believed that salvation and election depended only upon God’s grace, the protestant attempted an appeal to the evidence of worldly success as visible proof of God’s favor. “The Calling,” wrote Tawney, “is not a condition in which the individual is born, but a strenuous

and exacting enterprise to be undertaken indeed, under the guidance of Providence, but to be chosen by each man for himself, with a deep sense of his solemn responsibilities. 11 Although the skeleton of Luther's idea remained, the central concept of a stratified society, whose functions had been governed by rules of the church, disappeared before the conviction that each man had the right to attain an economic status commensurate with his abilities and God's favor.

To apply the theories of economic individualism to Robinson Crusoe might seem appropriate in view of Defoe's pride in the rise of the middle class and his praise of intermarriage between merchant families and the nobility. 12 But everything in Robinson Crusoe related to the calling constitutes an attack upon economic individualism. Interestingly enough, H. M. Robertson in his refutation of some of Tawney's theories selected Defoe as one of the few economic thinkers attacking those tradesmen who sought more than a moderate degree of wealth and who advanced the conservative ideal of the calling as "an invitation to live the orderly and settled life ordained by God, and to perform all duties pertaining to it." 13 And in 1720, during the frenzied buying and selling of South Sea Stock, Defoe reminded the merchant of the limits of his station. "What have merchants to do to turn Gamesters?" asked Defoe. "What have Linnen and Woolen Men to do with Box and Dice? Every man to his Business! Let them mind their calling and leave the Bites and Cullies to the Place of the Bites and Cullies." 14

Although Defoe's economic ideas were unquestionably conservative, I do not wish to suggest that they were anachronistic. In his Complete English Tradesman, Defoe argued that a man might change his calling and made no equation of God's will with parental choice of occupation. His advice to the tradesman has the same implications as the counsel of Crusoe's father. "Let the wise and wary tradesman take the hint;" Defoe warned, "keep within the bounds where Providence has placed him; be content to rise gradually and gently . . . and as he is sufficiently rich . . . go softly

on, lest he come swiftly down.”15 In Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe, the hero criticizes parents who choose a calling for their children which is unsuited to their natural abilities, but this is not meant as a reproach to his own parents who would have been content with any steady profession which their son might have selected.16 In opposition to his father’s advice Crusoe can only offer a desire to travel.

Before making any final judgment of Defoe’s attitude let us turn to the narration itself and Crusoe’s interpretation of events. Crusoe leaves his father’s home against his father’s advice and with the awareness of God’s revenge against disobedience in the disappearance of his two brothers, who also ran away and abandoned their callings. But instead of returning to York, he persists in following “the Dictates of . . . [his] Fancy rather than . . . [his] Reason” (I, 45). Does Crusoe’s disobedience have any effect on the events of the story? In discussing his failure to take his father’s advice, Crusoe concludes that this sin was the true cause of all his misfortunes. “If we will not allow a visible Curse to pursue visible Crimes,” Crusoe moralizes, “how shall we reconcile the Events of Things with the Divine Justice?” (II, 181). Certainly Crusoe’s entire narrative is based upon the assumption that God is continually punishing him for his “original sin.”

After his first shipwreck, the captain warns Crusoe never to voyage again since it is obviously against the “visible Hand of Heaven.” And when Crusoe angrily asks him whether he will continue to go to sea, the captain replies, “That is another Case . . . it is my Calling, and therefore my Duty” (I, 15). Crusoe rejects this advice, embarking once more as a passenger. On this voyage he gains neither wealth nor experience, and he is barely saved from joining the navy as a common sailor by a friend who offers to take him to Africa. This time he learns the art of sailing in addition to earning some money as a merchant, but even on this trip he falls sick of a calenture. When he ventures again, he is captured by the Moors and made a slave at Sallee, where he is forced to suffer all the humiliations which his father’s “prophetick Discourse” (I, 20) had suggested. Here he has the leisure to contemplate the rewards of his sin. His punishment always seems to take the form

of physical labor which symbolizes his decline from the middle class.

Crusoe eventually escapes from this manual toil as a gardener and fisherman, but the price of his escape is a return to the very station of life from which he tried to run away. Brought to Brazil, he becomes a planter and achieves the comfort of the “middle station” in which God seems determined to place him. But Crusoe is not happy. “I was gotten into an Employment quite remote from my Genius,” he tells the reader, “and directly contrary to the Life I delighted in, and for which I forsook my Father’s House, and broke thro’ all his good Advice; nay, I was coming into the very Middle Station, or Upper Degree of Low life, which my Father advised me to before; and which if I resolved to go on with, I might ha’ staid at Home . . .” (I, 39). During his four years in Brazil, Crusoe’s wealth increases enormously. His plantation grows and he has several servants as well as a slave. Thus his decision to leave his plantation is an indication of Crusoe’s restlessness, but it is hardly the restlessness of the enterprising businessman.17 Certainly his willingness to act as an agent for importing Negro slaves into Brazil is part of a desire to acquire wealth, but Crusoe’s real motive is his renewed desire to travel. On the island, shipwrecked and alone, he confesses that his condition is the result of God’s punishment upon him for leaving his plantation and the calling in which he might have been prosperous, if neither content nor happy. The result of this folly is once more to be thrown from the pleasures of the “middle station” in “the miseries and Hardships, the Labour and Sufferings of the mechanick part of Mankind” (I, 2).

Unless we understand how much Crusoe suffers in his twenty-eight years of isolation, it will be impossible to understand why he regards himself as an exemplum of God’s revenge upon the man who leaves his calling. Since Rousseau’s eulogy of Crusoe’s life in Émile, many critics have regarded the island as a do-it-yourself utopia. Of course Crusoe takes what satisfaction he can find in his attempts to recreate the products of European civilization.

17The difference between the conservative mercantilist businessman and the capitalist is best seen in Bernard Mandeville’s distinction between “Diligence” and “Industry.” Mandeville argued that a man might be hard working and save his money without thinking of improving his station in life, whereas “Industry implies, besides the other Qualities, a Thirst after Gain; and an Indefatigable Desire of meliorating our Condition.” Crusoe’s father is diligent but not industrious, while his son has neither of these qualities. See Mandeville, The Fable of the Bees, ed. F. B. Kaye (Oxford, 1924), I, 244.
But Defoe's hero is not a hermit by nature; he survives his solitude, but he does not enjoy it. When in his prayers Crusoe is about to thank God for giving him happiness, he reproaches himself for lying: "I know not what it was, but something shock'd my Mind at that Thought, and I durst not speak the Words: How canst thou be such a Hypocrite, (said I, even audibly) to pretend to be thankful for a Condition, which however thou may'st endeavour to be contented with, thou would'st rather pray heartily to be deliver'd from" (I, 131). For all the pleasure which he finds in invention, he never regards his labor as anything but a humiliating punishment for his sin.

Crusoe is explicit concerning the moral which can be drawn from his sufferings—his longing for companionship and his terror at the prospect of being devoured by cannibals, "I have been in all my Circumstances a Memento to those who are touched with the general Plague of Mankind, whence, for ought I know, one half of their Miseries flow; I mean, that of not being satisfy'd with the Station wherein God and Nature has plac'd them; for not to look back upon my primitive Condition... and the excellent Advice of my Father, the Opposition to which, was, as I may call it, my ORIGINAL SIN; my subsequent Mistakes of the same Kind had been the Means of my coming into this miserable Condition" (I, 225). Crusoe feels that his story should teach content to those "who cannot enjoy comfortably what God has given them" (I, 150). Ian Watt has argued that the real moral turns on Crusoe's success in the world, but there is no reason to believe that he would not have been as rich if he had not left York. It is certain that he would have been wealthier if he had remained in Brazil to "cultivate his garden."

After his many years on the island, Crusoe might be expected to have learned the contentment which he preaches to his readers.

18Although it is futile to speculate on Crusoe's possible success as a lawyer or tradesman in England, there is no reason to assume that he gains materially by his wandering. However there is no question that he loses money by his stay on the island. Reckoning his prospects in Brazil, he states that he would have been a rich man if he had remained on his plantation: "for had that Providence, which so happily had seated me at the Brasils, as a Planter, bless'd me with confin'd Desires, and I could have been contented to have gone on gradually, I might have been by this Time; I mean, in the Time of my being in this Island, one of the most considerable Planters in the Brasils, nay, I am perswaded that by the improvements I had made, in that little Time I lived there, and the Encrease I should probably have made, if I had stay'd, I might have been worth an hundred thousand Moydors [£137,500]..." (I, 225). Crusoe receives some returns from his plantation, but most
Happily married, with three children and a comfortable income, Crusoe nevertheless has a sudden desire to return to his island. But for the first time in his life he succeeds in conquering his wandering spirit by purchasing a farm. Now Crusoe believes that he is finally following his father’s wishes and adapting himself to the “middle State of Life” (II, 116). In reality, however, Crusoe has not come to terms with the mercantile world, for he tries to recreate the independent life of his island in the middle of England. “I farm’d my own Land,” he boasts, “I had no rent to pay, was limited by no Articles; I could pull up or cut down as I pleased: What I planted was for my self, and what I improved was for my Family” (II, 116). It is not surprising that Crusoe’s career as a “meer Country Gentleman” is short-lived. After the tragic deaths of his wife and children, Crusoe finds that he is unable to accept the middle-class illusion of content. He realizes that outside his self-subsisting economic island are the vices and luxuries of the rich and the drudgery of the poor “in daily Strugglings for Bread to maintain the vital Strength they labour’d with, so living in a daily Circulation of Sorrow” (II, 117). Incapable of adapting himself to the ideals of his father and yet unable to endure idleness, “The very Dregs of Life” (II, 119), Crusoe embarks for his island once more.

To return to his island as its governor, to use his wealth in promoting the welfare of its settlers—this would have been the new calling which God had chosen for Crusoe. This is indicated both by the intensity of Crusoe’s obsession about returning to the island, which his wife believes is “some powerful Impulse of Providence” (II, 114), and by Crusoe’s lack of success in England. But Crusoe rejects his responsibility again, and after establishing laws for the colony and sending supplies from Brazil, he sets off on his travels. “I was possessest with a wandring Spirit,” says Crusoe, and he adds a warning: “Let no wise Man flatter himself, with the Strength of his own Judgment, as if he was able to chuse any particular Station of Life for himself: Man is a short-sighted Creature, sees but a very little Way before him; and as his Passions, are none of his best Friends, so his particular Affections, are generally his worst Counselors” (III, 81). Crusoe’s choice of a “Station” is not a calling but merely a desire to travel. In deciding to leave his island of his annual profit has gone to the monastery of Saint Augustine where it has been used for charity and the conversion of the Indians. He emerges from his experience moderately wealthy, but not rich.
for the last time, Crusoe remarks that he “scorn’d all Advantages” (III, 80), and his disregard of his own interests produces the usual result. He is punished once more, this time by being abandoned by his mutinous crew at Bengal. Here, as we have seen, he enters business, only to quit this prosperous way of life in order to make the dangerous voyage back to England through Siberia.

At the beginning of his Serious Reflections, Crusoe contrasts the folly of the desert fathers with the wisdom of an acquaintance, a poor laborer, who followed his calling, led a pious life and achieved a sufficient degree of solitude in the midst of society.\(^\text{19}\) The puritan, as William Haller remarked, “had no reason to fear the world or run away from it. Rather he must go forth and do the will of God there.”\(^\text{20}\) Unlike his own example of the religious laborer or Haller’s puritan saint, Crusoe is continually running from this world. He views his story as a struggle between his reason, which tells him to follow his calling, and his triumphant passions, which force him to wander. On his island he is converted to an active Christianity and recognizes that God is punishing him for his transgressions, but “poor, wicked” Robinson Crusoe sins in spite of his religious faith. He has unquestionable powers of industry and invention, but any view of Crusoe as the embodiment of the capitalistic spirit must take into account his penchant for traveling and his hatred of a steady life. Crusoe does not disobey his parents in the name of free enterprise or economic freedom but for a strangely adventurous, romantic, and unprofitable desire to see foreign lands.\(^\text{21}\) If any economic moral can be drawn from Crusoe’s narrative, it is a conservative warning to Englishmen about to embark on the economic disaster of the South Sea Bubble that they should mind their callings and stick to the sure road of trade.

University of Michigan

\(^{19}\)P. 13. Defoe was merely embellishing the familiar parable of Saint Anthony and the tailor, which was frequently used to recommend contentment in one’s calling and to attack monasticism. Cf. Richard Steele, The Tradesman’s Calling (London, 1684), pp. 213-215, where the characters are a hermit and a cobbler with the original legend in The Sayings of the Fathers, in The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers, trans. Wallis Budge (London, 1907), pp. 149-150.


\(^{21}\)The conservative economic morality which Defoe wove into Robinson Crusoe should not be confused with a general condemnation of all adventure or traveling. To the contrary, he believed that no gentleman’s education was complete without a journey to foreign lands. See for example, Colonel Jack, Shakespeare Head ed., I, 207.