Faith and Economics in *Robinson Crusoe*¹

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Abstract: This paper offers a case study in the juxtaposition of literature and economics, making use of Daniel Defoe’s novel *Robinson Crusoe*. The novel is an extended treatment of social isolation; and many social theorists, including many economists specifically, have thought that focusing on a person in isolation is a useful means of illuminating certain significant aspects of the ‘social’. Moreover, in this text there is much material dealing with the spiritual aspects of isolation/solitude. In that sense, in *Robinson Crusoe*, faith, economics, and social theory all come together; and we consider it an interesting exercise to examine how Defoe’s text illuminates these matters both in themselves and in their relation to each other.

1. Prolegomenon

Scholars who are interested in faith and economics and the relation between them are used to being involved in a juxtaposition of intellectual endeavors that many of their colleagues find implausible. Here, we want to engage in a somewhat similar ‘implausible juxtaposition’ — that of economics (and social theory more generally) with literature. Our case study in this particular engagement² is Daniel Defoe’s novel *Robinson Crusoe*. This is good subject matter for the purpose because the novel is an extended treatment of social isolation; and many social theorists, including many economists specifically, have thought that focusing on a person in isolation is a useful means of illuminating certain significant aspects of the ‘social’. It is good subject matter, too, for this particular setting, because (somewhat surprisingly for those not well acquainted with the text) there is much material dealing with the spiritual aspects of isolation/solitude. In that sense, in *Robinson Crusoe*, faith, economics, and social theory all come together; and we consider it an interesting exercise to examine how Defoe’s text illuminates these
matters both in themselves and in their relation to each other. Such is the purpose of this article.

2. The Problematic

Let us begin with an issue in economic method: Is the model of a person acting in isolation a helpful tool in economic analysis?

There are certainly many distinguished economists who have thought so. Robinson Crusoe, as the archetypal “isolated individual,” appears, with approval, in the works of Carl Menger (1871) and, following Menger, Böhm-Bawerk (1889), and Lionel Robbins (1935) and a host of modern textbook writers. The thought seems to have been that the hero of Defoe’s novel affords a telling example for the analysis of rational choice/behavior — and this precisely because Crusoe (at least until Friday arrives) is unencumbered by complications associated with the presence of other persons. Precisely what those “complications” are, and what their status for developing a satisfactory “economics” might be, are unclear. After all, whether choice is exercised in isolation or in the presence of others does not, on the face of it, seem to bear on whether action/choice can be rational or not.

Karl Marx (1867) is also a notable Crusoe enthusiast. On Marx’s view, the significant fact about Crusoe is that all the artefacts Crusoe produces are valued by him according to their usefulness: there is none of the “value in exchange” characteristic of the interdependent structure of the market economy, and which is, in Marx’s scheme, the source of commodification and alienation of the worker from that worker’s output. In that sense, for Marx, Crusoe’s isolation is an essential feature in a way that is not so clear in the mainstream paradigm.

At a less exalted level, references to Crusoe appear in many first-year “principles” lectures — essentially as a means of making the process of rational decision-making (and related concepts like opportunity cost) vivid to students and of investing a little “human interest” into what might otherwise seem a purely abstract mathematical exercise (that of maximization subject to constraint).

The fitness of Crusoe for deployment in economics has not gone unchallenged — most particularly by those who conceive the discipline more in terms of catallaxy than of “economizing.” Richard Whately
(1831/1832) declared that Crusoe is in a situation of which political economy “has no cognizance.” For Whately, and more recently for Buchanan (1964), economics is centrally concerned with *exchange*; and analysis of the individual in an imagined solitary state, whatever else its virtues, simply serves to abstract from what is, on the catallactic view, fundamental. Here is how Buchanan (1964) puts the point:

Robinson Crusoe on his island before Friday arrives, makes decisions; his is the economic problem in the sense traditionally defined. This choice situation is not however an appropriate starting point for our discipline, even at the broadest conceptual level, as Whately correctly noted more than a century ago. … The uniquely symbiotic aspects of behavior, of human choice, arise only when Friday steps on the island and Crusoe is forced into association with another human being. The fact of association requires that a wholly different and wholly new sort of behavior take place – that of “exchange,” “trade” or “agreement.” Crusoe may of course fail to recognize this new fact. He may treat Friday simply as a means to his own ends, as part of nature so to speak. If he does so, a “fight” ensues and to the victor go the spoils. (Buchanan, 1964, pp. 217-218)

There is no doubt much in this passage that deserves more extended discussion. Note, for example, Buchanan’s suggestion that exchange and agreement are coterminous; or his assertion that treating Friday as a means to Crusoe’s own ends necessarily leads to fighting; or the suggestion that symbiosis can occur only through *interpersonal* (and not interspecies) relations. None of these claims is self-evident. But here, our object is simply to underline Buchanan’s doubts about Crusoe-economics and, more generally, about the questionable idea of a social science that takes as its paradigmatic example an essentially asocial setting.

What seems to be at stake here is a methodological claim about which aspects of the ‘economic way of thinking’ (to use Paul Heyne’s (1999) apt phrase) is more foundational — whether scarcity or agent rationality or the positive sum potential in human interactions can make claim to be THE basic notion. Now, one might think that the quest for a single “basic notion” is a mistaken enterprise — that all these elements play an important role in the “economist’s approach” and that they do
so simultaneously. Nevertheless, Buchanan may well have a point — that focusing on Crusoe in his circumstances of solitude tends to occlude features of the ‘economic model of social existence’ that are indeed indispensable. It is worth noting in this connection that the Crusoe case not only rules out exchange: it also takes off the table any more general consideration of the ”structure of interdependence” that describes the way in which actions by one individual affect the incentives and/or the well-being of others (what one might think of as the special domain of game theory) and which is arguably an indispensable piece of the ”economic way of thinking”!

Economists are not the only commentators who have sought to lift Crusoe out of his purely literary setting — to use him as a tool for other purposes. For example, Rousseau (1763) recommended Robinson Crusoe as basic reading for the young Emile. Rousseau called it a “marvellous book” – one that “brings together so many lessons scattered in so many books” and joins “them in a common object which is easy to see and interesting to follow and can serve as a stimulant even at this (early) age.” It is the “most felicitous treatise on natural education.” And so, “…this book will be the first that my Emile will read. For a long time, it will alone compose his whole library and it will always hold a distinguished place there. It will be the text for which all discussions on the natural sciences will serve only as a commentary.” (All this from a man who self-confessedly “hates books.”) For Rousseau, explicitly, Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe triumphs over anything in Aristotle and Pliny. Recall that for Rousseau, man in his isolated state is “born free”: only subsequently do the forces of society “bind him in chains.” It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that Rousseau might find Defoe’s picture of ”isolated man” good material for the young Emile’s education.

It is entirely predictable — and not improper in itself — that those who seek to appropriate Crusoe for their own purposes, will abstract from those aspects of the novel that do not suit, or are not relevant for, their various applications. Yet we believe that there is much to be said for taking the novel at face value: for allowing Crusoe to ‘speak for himself’; or, more accurately, to attend to what Defoe has Crusoe thinking and saying and doing. And as we hope to show, this exercise involves taking seriously the significant religious element in the narrative. In that connection, it is worth noting that the contest over appropriate social method has an analogue in the religious domain. What role does solitude
play in spiritual development? Or alternatively put, to what extent are interpersonal relations central to the Christian picture of an appropriate life? As we shall see, Defoe’s novel has some interesting things to say about this issue.

In some cases, commentators note the violence they are doing to the original. Rousseau briefly retells the basic Crusoe story “disencumbered of all its rigmarole”: Emile, it would seem, is simply to attend to Robinson’s adventures. Marx is more explicit in dismissing religion: “We do not refer at this time to praying and other such activities, since our Robinson derives enjoyment from them and regards such activity as recreation.”

One might make two points about this latter remark. The first is that to treat Crusoe’s spiritual engagements as mere “entertainment” is, whatever else, to do serious violence to Crusoe’s own view. The second, more economistic point, is to note that from a rational choice point of view, the status of Crusoe’s religious activities is neither here nor there. Even if reduced to the level of “entertainments,” those activities take time and attention away from other “productive” pursuits — they have an opportunity cost; they have value for those who engage in them, and hence figure in any account of agent behavior that deploys the rationality paradigm, as Wicksteed (1910) explains; and as Iannacone (1998) develops. Moreover, in our view, to offer an account of *Robinson Crusoe* that omits the role that Providence plays in Crusoe’s conception of his own unfolding predicament is a case of Hamlet without the prince.

Of course, *Robinson Crusoe*, the novel, is neither an economic treatise nor a theological tract. One cannot expect to answer definitively the methodological and/or theological questions associated with solitude just by examining Defoe’s narrative. Nevertheless, economists interested in religious matters might, we reckon, find something of value in an examination of the original; and our aim here is to point to elements in the text that bear on these methodological and theological questions.

### 3. Some Preliminaries

First published in 1719 when its author, Daniel Defoe, was fifty-nine, *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* was an immediate success and has been continually republished, reprinted
and translated into many languages ever since. It is regarded by some as the first modern novel, in English at any rate. Defoe followed it up in the same year with *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* and, in 1720, with *Serious Reflections during the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. In 1722 he published a second novel in the form of an “autobiography” by *Moll Flanders* detailing the prolific marital, sexual and criminal adventures, in Britain and the American colonies, of his eponymous anti-heroine.

Whatever else it might be, *Robinson Crusoe* is a gripping adventure story: which accounts for its perennial success over the past three centuries. But *Serious Reflections* is an indication that Defoe might have regarded the work as something more — specifically, as in part a kind of “spiritual autobiography,” a genre favored by English Puritans of which Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* is the most famous example.

Defoe himself was raised in a Puritan family immediately after the Restoration in 1660 of crown, church and parliament that followed the death of Cromwell. At that point, Puritans were compelled to choose: either conform to the Anglican liturgy and order, which they had hated and resisted for a century, or quit the Church of England. About 2,000 ministers with their congregations chose not to conform. Defoe’s Presbyterian parents were among these “Nonconformists” or “Dissenters.” They were granted toleration of their religion in 1662 but excluded from public life.

As a young man, Daniel himself gave evidence of his Puritan convictions by joining the Monmouth rebellion of Protestant Dissenters in 1685 against the Roman Catholic King James II. Daniel was granted a pardon and thus escaped the ‘Bloody Assize’ of Judge Jeffrey; and indeed, after the Glorious Revolution (1688-89) he became a faithful subject and secret agent of the new king, the decidedly Protestant William III.

Much of Defoe’s adult life was spent as a merchant and entrepreneur. He had in that respect first-hand knowledge of economic realities. He was also a political pamphleteer and secret political agent. But, notwithstanding the evident moderation in later life of his ancestral hatred of the Church of Rome, there is no reason to doubt the strength and sincerity of his religious convictions and, more particularly, their significance in understanding and interpreting *Robinson Crusoe*. 
4. Crusoe’s Rationality

Does Defoe’s account of Crusoe’s behavior inform our notions of rational agency in any way? Perhaps we shouldn’t expect it to. After all, Defoe was not an economist, and it would seem hopelessly anachronistic to suppose that he had access to the various details of the rational calculus that it would take specialists in economics another couple of centuries to formulate and refine. Subsequent authors’ use of Crusoe as a hook on which to hang their discussions are, then, not to be interpreted as any reference to Defoe’s text at all. These references operate merely as a vague “recognition device” such as one might deploy in referring to someone who betrays another as a “Judas,” or to a seducer as a “Lothario.”

But in the case of Robinson Crusoe there is, perhaps, rather more at stake. After all, Defoe’s book is a classic precisely because its description of Crusoe’s life on the island has rung true enough with generations of readers for a presumption to exist that any alternative account of the conditions of solitude ought not lie too far from the original, provided we are prepared to make an imaginative leap to the effect that Crusoe does not go mad with loneliness – as, for example, the marooned Ben Gunn does in Stevenson’s Treasure Island — or fall prey to disease. Put another way, the various refinements that economists offer — equalization of marginal values or of inter-temporal rates of return; or the claim that marginal values are diminishing — should strike the Crusoe reader as plausible and significant.

However, as Söllner (2016) has recently argued, Defoe’s picture of Crusoe’s behavior does not really match the picture of rational man as economists present it — and, more to the point, does not strike the reader as being unsatisfactory in not so doing. For example, Crusoe consistently makes mistakes of various kinds. And many of the good things that happen to him occur by “accident” not design, thereby providing scope for Crusoe’s reflections on “Providence.” Crusoe operates by rules and habits that have no obvious rationale in the standard economic account of optimizing behaviour. And so on.

Söllner provides several examples, and there are others that might serve equally well. Perhaps the most notable ‘mistake’ is exemplified by the five months of intensive labor that Crusoe devotes to the construction of a canoe from a tree he selects and manages to fell — only to discover that the craft is too far from the creek, and not sufficiently uphill
of it, for him to be able to get it to the water’s edge. He learns from this episode that one ought to count the cost of activities before becoming committed to them; that one ought to imagine problems that might arise and establish that a solution is likely to be available before undertaking a task that will prove infeasible. This in itself is a good ‘rational’ lesson — but it is one that Crusoe learns all too late.

“Accidents” abound in Crusoe’s survival. The grain that he is able finally to cultivate derives from what he takes to be dust, which he empties on a patch of bare ground in order to clean out a pouch that he has rescued from the ship. That “dust” germinates and provides him with a pleasant surprise: raw material for making bread! The logs of wood that he hews and then drives into the ground to provide a rough fence for his protection, take root and continue to grow to form a solid protective wall that is proof against almost any intrusion (another example of an “unintended consequence” of a fortuitous kind). In many ways, Crusoe is lucky. And he knows it. And more to the point, it is these episodes of good fortune that provide the soil in which his sense of divine providence is grounded.

Of course, the model of agent rationality, properly deployed, does not entail “perfect information,” and indeed in any setting where information acquisition is costly, rules out the assumption of perfect information (as a referee points out). But it is worth noting that Crusoe’s “ignorance” is in part a result of his isolation. In the well-functioning social order that Adam Smith envisages in *The Wealth of Nations*, each individual will develop skills and knowledge specifically relevant to the activity in which he or she specializes: the division of labor involves an epistemic aspect that is necessarily missing in the isolated setting. In other words, Crusoe’s relative ignorance is an entirely predictable feature of his isolated setting!

In any event, whether Defoe’s Crusoe is in fact fully “rational” in the sense(s) that economists deploy that term is a tricky question, and it is hardly helped by the fact that economists themselves seem confused as to how exactly rationality is to be defined. (For a catalogue of meanings of the term “rationality” see Geoffrey Brennan in Peter and Schmid (2007).) For example, in its ‘positive’ predictive sense, rationality is simply a consistency relation between action and desire/preference, subject to belief. The fact that agents are rational in this sense does not imply, as many economists seem to think, that those same agents are also ‘rational’ in the
sense that their actions serve to maximize their well-being (even in an expected sense). For the two notions to be equivalent it is required either that maximization of own well-being is the sole object of the agent’s desires; or that the notion of well-being is exhausted by ‘preference satisfaction.’ Neither of these option strikes us as self-evidently valid. Crusoe, for example, regards his original desire to leave home and pursue adventure as inimical to his own well-being, although there is no question that the pursuit of adventure is a desire of his, and that his actions can be explained in terms of satisfying that desire.

More generally, the supposition that an understanding of what rational behavior entails is enhanced by examining an individual in total isolation from human society — and in a setting which he manifestly did not choose (so, in that sense, not itself a “rational” setting) — is perhaps less than totally obvious.

5. Dimensions of Solitude: Freedom and the Division of Labor

The fact that Crusoe did not choose his solitude — that it was thrust upon him — does not, of course, mean that it did not have certain benefits; so, it may be useful briefly to catalogue these (as indeed Crusoe himself does at various points in the novel). Of course, Crusoe laments the lack of human companionship. He yearns to have someone to converse with, and indulges in much self-pity (including episodes of extended weeping) on that account.

Yet it is interesting that in the notable scene in which Crusoe discovers a human footprint in the sand, his immediate response is not one of delight but one of terror. In a reaction reminiscent of Hobbes’s grim account of the “state of nature,” other persons strike Crusoe, first and foremost, as potential predators rather than as possible companions. Crusoe’s solitude is, then, to be seen, at least, as freedom from a certain kind of fear.

Solitude is also freedom from the scrutiny of others. It is presumably in this that we see one aspect of the attraction that Defoe’s novel had for Rousseau: social esteem, and the *amour propre* to which it gives rise (and which to Rousseau is the primary source of humanity’s “chains”), is entirely absent on Crusoe’s island.

Indeed, the notion that solitude secures ‘freedom’ may be generalized. In much of normative social theory, ‘freedom’ is to be understood
in terms of the actions of other human agents. That is, only actions by other persons count as rights violations — or, more broadly, as relevant for freedom. And that has led many theorists to understand the concept of freedom in terms of independence — a quality that, as it happens, is maximally realized on Crusoe’s island (before Friday arrives). (See, for example, List and Valentini (2016).)

Philip Pettit’s (1997) critique of standard “liberal” conceptions of freedom focuses exactly on this point. As he puts it: “. . . liberalism, at least in its pure form, presents liberty as a condition ideally enjoyed out of society, when there is no one else around.” Pettit’s alternative understanding of freedom in terms of ‘non-domination’ certainly clears logical space for the possibility of genuine social relations that can qualify as “free.” But it is not so clear that non-domination answers the conceptual challenge. Crusoe would surely qualify as totally “free from domination” no less than as being “free from interference.” The analytic picture that emerges from “freedom as independence” is that Crusoe is the archetypical “free man” – and that he trades off such freedom in return for other benefits of society. However, this picture itself raises certain theoretical difficulties. Given that Crusoe is on his solitary island involuntarily, it would seem that maximum freedom can only be secured by compulsion: which is neither a happy, nor an intuitively appealing, conclusion. The moral we are inclined to draw from such observations is that there are reasons for suspicion about any notion of “freedom” based exclusively on independence.

For economists, “freedom” is often understood in terms of the size of opportunity sets — the range of goods/circumstances/situations over which the agent can exercise choice. Commercial society, an order based on the predominance of markets, is often defended on the grounds that it maximizes freedom of choice for its participants. In so doing, the market order also maximizes aggregate material well-being; or, perhaps derivatively, preference satisfaction. In this tradition, Crusoe’s predicament reflects the fact that he cannot take advantage of the generalized gains from exchange that social interaction affords. But, strictly speaking, the term “gains from exchange” is somewhat misleading here. The gains that commercial society offers include gains from specialization which may be associated with exchange but need not be logically entailed by it. However, as Adam Smith remarked, the “division of
labor is limited by the extent of the market” — and in Crusoe’s world, that limit is extreme.

In fact, in Crusoe’s case the limits are rather less extreme than his ‘solitary’ state might lead one to suppose. The fact that the ship remains accessible for an extended period means that Crusoe can take advantage of the specialization (and division of labor) embodied in the various things he can ferry to the island — guns and powder and shot; various tools; tent cloth; paper and writing equipment; and so forth. At one point in the narrative, Crusoe compiles a list of pros and cons associated with his situation on his island:

God wonderfully sent the ship in near enough to the shore that I have gotten out so many necessary things as will either supply my wants or enable me to supply myself even as long as I live. (Defoe, 1719)

The point Defoe makes here is illustrated afresh in the contrast between Crusoe and a group of Spanish and Portuguese sailors whom Crusoe later learns of, when he saves Friday’s father and one of the Spaniards from cannibals. This group, though fourteen in number, “were under the greatest distress imaginable, having neither weapons nor clothes nor any food, but at the mercy and discretion of the savages…” (Defoe, 1719, p. 204).

In short, Crusoe, in his many years of total solitude, was not so totally cut off from the benefits of commercial society as his solitude might lead one to believe. Moreover, it seems clear that Crusoe was alert to the significance of such benefits. Even though Defoe may have had no well-worked theory of how these benefits arise, it seems clear that he understood well enough that they depended in some manner on the mutual advantage that can arise from social interaction. Defoe is hardly original here. Socrates develops his theory of justice in *The Republic* explicitly on the assumption that a person is not individually self-sufficient. Saint Paul emphasizes the division of labor within the church. Hobbes takes it that peaceful interactions (of the kind ruled out in the state of nature) generate huge mutual advantages. However, in none of these cases is there the detailed account (of the kind one finds in Smith (1977)) of how such mutual advantage can be harnessed and extended. For Crusoe, the benefits of specialization (and exchange)
that are characteristic of market society are limited — but they are not totally absent.

6. Crusoe’s Spiritual Development

Crusoe, though bereft of human company, does not find himself totally alone. In addition to his dog and his two cats, he has reading material — specifically, the ship’s Bible. (By the third year of his occupancy of the island, Crusoe is reading the Bible thrice each day.) And he also has writing material — so that he can keep a record not just of his activities and projects but also of his thoughts and attitudes:

not so much to leave them to any that were to come after me, for I was like to have but few heirs, as to deliver my thoughts from daily poring upon them and afflicting my mind; and as my reason began now to master my despondency, I began to comfort myself as well as I could, and set the good against the evil, that I might have something to distinguish my case from worse. (Defoe, 1719, p. 56)

In the process of his reading and his reflections on that reading, Crusoe comes to practice regular prayer. And, through this reading and prayer, he comes to the realization that he is not in fact alone: God is continually with him.

One morning, feeling very sad, I opened the Bible on these words – “I will never, never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” Immediately it occurred that these words were to me. Why else should they be directed in such a manner, just at the moment when I was mourning over my condition as one forsaken by God and man? “Well then” I said “if God does not forsake me, of what ill consequence can it be or what matters it, though the world should all forsake me, seeing on the other hand if I had all the world and should lose the favor and blessing of God, there would be no comparison in the loss?” (Defoe, 1719, p. 97)

And this realization has a surprising upshot:

From this moment I began to conclude in my mind that it was possible for me to be more happy in this forsaken solitary condition than it was probable I should ever have been in any other
particular state in the world; and with this thought I was going to give thanks to God for bringing me to this place. (Defoe, 1719, p. 110)

The conclusion that his solitude in in fact a blessing is not one that at first Crusoe can quite bring himself to maintain. But a year later,

I had now brought my state of life to be ... much easier in my mind ... I learned to look more on the bright side of my condition and less on the dark side... With these reflections I worked my mind up not only to resignation to the will of God in the present disposition of my circumstances, but even to sincere thankfulness for my condition. (Defoe, 1719, p. 112)

Crusoe entertains two specific comparisons in this connection. First, he compares his state with how much worse it might have been. Unlike his shipmates he is spared from drowning. There are no wild beasts on his island — unlike what he “…saw on the coasts of Africa: and what if I had been shipwrecked there?” (p. 59). And of course, there is the proximity of the resource-rich ship. “These reflections made me very sensible of the goodness of Providence to me and very thankful for my present condition, with all its hardships and misfortunes.” (p. 111) But the further comparison of himself in his earlier state compared with that he now finds himself in leads him to value the solitude in and of itself. His very isolation on the island becomes evidence for him of divine providence.

This view surely reflects Defoe’s own about the value of solitude. If solitude is the source of spiritual development in Crusoe’s case, then this fact can stand as a kind of morality tale for Defoe’s readers. As the Desert Fathers and founders of Christian monachism believed, life in society may involve too many distractions for the spiritual life to flourish fully: a surprising conclusion, perhaps, from so resolute a Protestant as Defoe.

Crusoe himself, reflecting on his previous seafaring life, is instructively scathing:

I had lived a dreadful life, perfectly destitute of the knowledge and fear of God. ... Falling early into the seafaring life and into seafaring company, all that little sense of religion which I had entertained was laughed out of me by my messmates, by a
hardened despising of dangers and the view of death, which grew habitual to me. ... in all the great deliverances I enjoyed, I never once had the word “Thank God” so much as on my mind or in my mouth; nor in the greatest distress had I so much as a thought to pray to him or so much as to say “Lord have mercy upon me”; no, nor to mention the name of God unless it was to swear by or blaspheme. (pp. 111/112)

It is likewise notable that, in the final chapters of the book, once Crusoe is delivered from the island, there is little mention of God, “Providence,” regular Bible reading or disciplinary prayer. Adventures and amusing episodes (as, for example, Friday’s wrestling with a bear seems intended to be) and the management of his financial affairs, seem to take over Crusoe’s life. Nor does Crusoe register any regrets about this. His vestigial qualms about Roman Catholicism do draw him back from settling in Brazil – but the nature of those qualms, apart from the observation that they were a legacy of his island life, receives no further discussion, no more indeed than the tiny reference to his marriage and his having children.

Two things seem clear from all this. One is that some measure of solitude is seen by Defoe as a necessary feature of the spiritual life. The other is that, for Defoe, the primary Christian virtue is that of having a grateful heart. It is this virtue that Crusoe comes to both recognize and, in substantial measure to develop, within himself, over the course of the many long years (28 of them) on the island.

Now, although the virtue of gratitude is first and foremost a matter of attitude, it is by no means inert in the arena of action. For example, when the cannibals appear on his island, Crusoe’s first instinct is to slaughter them — but reflection makes him draw back. He is drawn instead to “Christian compassion.” “This appeared so clear to me ...” that by refraining from such slaughter, “I had not been suffered to do a thing which I now saw so much reason to believe would have been no less a sin than wilful murder had I committed it. And I gave most humble thanks on my knees to God who had thus delivered me from blood-guiltiness...” (p. 146). What Defoe thinks of as the primary Christian virtue of gratitude is actually that which leads Crusoe to the preeminent “theological virtue” of charity.
Before we leave the religious themes in the novel, however, it is worth underlining one telling episode, occurring late in the narrative, in which Crusoe decides to instruct Friday in the Christian religion. In discussion between them, Friday raises a fundamental question for any coherent monotheistic faith: the problem of evil. “‘But,’ Friday says again, ‘if God much strong, much might as the devil, why God not kill the devil so make him no more do wicked?’” (p. 182). Crusoe is nonplussed. He has no answer to this question — and knows that he hasn’t. At first, he pretends not to hear Friday. Then he gets angry and sends Friday away. He prays to God for guidance. The exchange serves to make Crusoe highly sensitive to his own inadequacies as a religious instructor; but he persists. And in the endeavor: “I really informed and instructed myself in many things that either I did not know or had not fully considered before” (p. 184). And indeed, the sense that he is “made an instrument under Providence to save the life, and for aught I know the soul, of a poor savage” lends him a “secret joy” that “ran through every part of my soul; and I frequently rejoiced that ever I was brought to this place which I had so often thought the most dreadful of all afflictions...”

This episode changes the relation between Crusoe and Friday. For one thing, Friday reveals himself, in his various challenges, to be Crusoe’s intellectual equal — and perhaps more to the point, Crusoe’s spiritual equal. For: “we were equally [sic] penitent and comforted, restored ...”; and, Crusoe observes: “I had more affection . . . than ever I felt before” (p. 184).

There is a theological issue embedded in this latter episode. Up to this point, one might consider that in Defoe’s view solitude is a necessary condition for spiritual development. But notwithstanding the Desert Fathers, that would be a theologically unorthodox position. When, for example, Jesus summarizes the law, he insists that “love of God” and “love of neighbor” are alike: “the second is like unto it” is the prelude to the Good Samaritan parable. For Christians, one’s relations with one’s fellows are a critical aspect of a religious life. Without neighbors, as Crusoe is for the first 25 years of his life on the island, an essential dimension of the Christian life is missing. For there can be no charity without someone to be charitable to. And indeed, in a strictly etymological sense there can be no ‘religion’ whatsoever. For religio is that which binds us to one another and to God. It is only when Friday
appears that there is any possibility of the full, religious expression of Christian spirituality. And in this episode, Defoe seems to gesture at that thought: human society and true religion are complements, not substitutes. If this is Defoe’s intention, the episode just described plays an important role in the account of Crusoe’s religious development and of the overall message of the book. Though much of the narrative seems to focus attention on the centrality of solitude for religious development, Defoe apparently does not wish to leave out the whole relational element in the Christian tradition that many would see to be essential.

One important theological issue that Defoe’s novel raises can then be seen as securing the right balance between solitude and society in the Christian life. This is, of course, a quite different issue from that which preoccupies Buchanan (and Whateley) and their economist targets in relation to proper economic method; and is to be settled by appeal to quite different principles. But the rival positions in the two debates are interestingly parallel.

7. Conclusions

A theoretically serviceable nexus between “Faith” and “Economics” depends upon the assumption that sane human beings may exhibit both the theological virtue of “Faith” and a rational stewardship of scarce resources for themselves or others; and experience no intellectual inconsistency in so doing.

What is the connection between the “Faith” that is the principal concern of Defoe in Robinson Crusoe and the “Economics” that many in our profession have perceived in that novel? Is it simply that an English Puritan of the early eighteenth century was more likely to be a merchant and entrepreneur than his Anglican fellow-citizens, whether Whig or Tory, and therefore more likely to conduct his business with at least procedural rationality? Is there a relation between the rationality, such as it is, that informs Crusoe’s economic behavior and the spiritual awareness forced on him in his solitude? And is there a necessary connection between “Faith” and “Economics” in general of which Robinson Crusoe is simply an illustration?

Although the answer to the first question is probably “Yes,” it is evident – as we have argued in section 4 – that Crusoe’s behavior on the
island is no model of procedural rationality. Though protected from the harshest aspects of the economic problem by capital from the wreck, Crusoe’s attempts to improve his situation are often ill-conceived. Defoe’s novel abounds in examples of the (non-catallactic) problem of economizing scarce resources, but few of Crusoe’s actions can be construed as rational solutions to those problems.

If catallaxy is the central preoccupation of economic theory, there can be no “Economics” in Robinson Crusoe until the arrival of Friday. Crusoe’s solitude, even when broken by the invasion of savages, rules out exchange.

How is Crusoe’s undoubted spiritual development related, if at all, to “economics”? We have argued in section 6 that not only is there no possibility of a full expression of Christian spirituality on Crusoe’s part until Friday joins him, but that true religion and human society are complementary; and that this is an important element in the overall message of Defoe’s book, notwithstanding the spiritual advantages of solitude. Human society is a necessary condition for a catallactic understanding of “economics.” And it is a necessary condition for a full expression of true religion.

“Faith,” regarded as a voluntary disposition towards the transcendent, and “Economics,” regarded as a scientific study of the material condition of human life, are necessarily connected by the fact that both can be performed by the same human being. Crusoe exhibits the former but not the latter, for indeed “Economics” in that sense does not appear until fifty years after Defoe’s novel. But if “Economics” is construed more broadly as any sustained thinking, however unsystematic, about the material conditions of human life, then Robinson Crusoe can surely qualify. What seems clear, however, is that for Defoe such sustained thinking has an irreducible religious component!

Notes

1. This article arose out of a discussion of Robinson Crusoe at the Annual ‘PPE and Literature’ Colloquium held at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in October 2018. We are grateful to the participants in that colloquium as well as two anonymous referees for helpful input. We should also place on record our appreciation for the editors of this journal in being prepared to accommodate this
avoedly eccentric exercise. We take full responsibility for remaining errors.

2. For a similar exercise dealing with another important text, see our treatment of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* in Brennan and Waterman (forthcoming).

3. A referee points out that Robbins owed his deployment of the Crusoe reference to Frank Knight and Knight’s famous “five questions” to which the economic system must supply answers. See Knight (1933/1951). Knight was, incidentally, Buchanan’s mentor at the University of Chicago in the late 1940s.

4. This claim is based on casual observation over our two independent and extended careers: we know of no systematic evidence to this effect.

5. A referee raises the question as to whether any distinction between exchange and specialization makes any practical sense. Certainly, Smith seems to have believed that exchange and specialization co-evolve (*The Wealth of Nations*, chapter 2) and in that sense are intimately connected. However, Soviet-style planned economies exhibit specialization without exchange; and there can be a fully operational market in kidneys without any individual specializing in the production of kidneys as such. Specialization in the intellectual domain (an example that Smith appeals to in chapter 1 of *The Wealth of Nations*) takes shape largely without exchange: many of the advances in modern physics are made available to others without payment, or without ‘exchanging’ with the originator anything in the manner of comparable knowledge.

6. One might note in this connection a further aspect of the division of labor to which Crusoe is denied access. In the spirit of Saint Paul on the division of labor within the church, Crusoe would — in society — have had access to the writings of those many who had grappled with precisely this question; and the opportunity to consult and seek advice from those of his contemporaries who had specialized in theological studies.

References


