

## Cognitive Crusoe: Care in the Museum of the Mind

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This essay offers a new reading of *Robinson Crusoe*, examining the attachments that spring up in the elaboration of objectivity. It poses an argument about the mind as a property that emerges through caring about things. I am just in the process of completing a book entitled *The Mind is a Collection* (Penn, 2015), which is arranged as the exhibit catalogue of a virtual museum of eighteenth-century objects.<sup>1</sup> Book and museum together craft an argument about the history of objectivity, tracing the development of empiricist epistemologies entirely through objects of intense personal attachment. Its core claim is that philosophical dualisms, the strange epistemological schism emerging between things like mind and body, subject and object, idea and thing, self and environment, are themselves produced by certain kinds of historical situations. Theories of objectivity and indeed of radical remove, historically speaking, have sprung up through profound investments in objects of concern; philosophical dualisms are the natural products of ecologies of thinking.

Robinson Crusoe offers a good example because he clearly and consistently articulates a cognitive model arising out of empiricist epistemology; he survives partly by thinking of the mind as its own place. He constructs a dwelling that would not look out of place as a model for cognition in John Locke's letters to Stillingfleet or Robert Hooke's lectures to the Royal Society. He lives in a fortress, aggressively isolating himself from his environment, and he offers clues that he thinks of his mind in the same way. This complicated relationship with his island echoes relationships elaborated by the crucial figures in the rise of the empiricist epistemology, each of whom developed deep attachments to objects of care and spaces of thinking. John Locke was a closet bibliophile, who thought of the mind as a cabinet; Joseph Addison was a lifelong collector of coins, who repeatedly called the mind a collection; Robert Hooke was the first "curator" of the first modern museum in Britain, who based his model of intellect on the "Repository" in which he worked, and so on. Each of these people was important in the elaboration of the empiricist epistemology, of mental activity as the gathering, arrangement, and display of objects of intellect; and each elaborated his insights through models based on objects of intense personal concern.

Crusoe's situation therefore offers an opportunity to revisit the major strands of Enlightenment philosophy, rebinding philosophies of detachment to the curatorial activities with which they developed in parallel. What is more, approaching the novel in this way allows us to revisit the recent history of literary criticism, one major strand of which has developed alongside modern cognitive science. Over the last century or so, Crusoe has emerged as a well-known example of modern individualism—turning up not only in literary criticism, but in treatises on cognitive psychology and related fields, like classical and neoliberal economics. Because so much of the novel stages an individual on an island, the book seems to formalize thoughts and experiences as the properties of individuals. The cognitive model, in which the mind's processing functions are thought to stand apart from its ideas, is generally understood to be a legacy of the Enlightenment, and it is

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mindisacollection.org>

this model that the book has been summoned up to advance. Crusoe has himself emerged as a hero and exemplar of this position; the position, sometimes called “the Robinson Crusoe Assumption,” is that all knowledge is ultimately resolvable as a problem of information processing, of a reasoning engine presiding over the influx and management of ideas. And though the weight of the novel seems to militate against such a reading, this position is nevertheless occasionally advanced by Crusoe himself; “As Reason,” Crusoe insists, “is the substance and original of the Mathematics, so by stating and squaring every thing by Reason, and by making the most rational Judgment of things, every Man may be in time Master of every mechanic Art.”

The curious thing is that criticism of Defoe’s novel has so often echoed Crusoe’s own assumption about how he makes sense of the world. Crusoe’s accomplishments would seem to be the seal and practical proof of his cognitive possessive individualism, his philosophical dualism. More recent studies of Crusoe continue to elaborate this tradition, not only identifying Crusoe as an avatar of the intellectual information age, but offering readings which assume that readers of the novel will respond to it in the same way as Crusoe insists he responds to his world. This is a position which turns up, for instance, in Margaret Cohen’s *The Novel and the Sea*, which offers a reading of *Robinson Crusoe* that hinges, in turn, on Wolfgang Iser’s influential formulation of the “cybernetic reader.” By this account, an agent finds him or herself in a situation, considers the available options based on the available information, and acts according to a series of probable outcomes.

There are, indeed, a couple of times where Crusoe himself seems to report that he approached a problem—of hunger, of isolation, or whatever—in just such a way. It may in fact be that the very genre in and through which he writes, adapted perhaps from the keeping of logs on board ship, forces this sort of mental accounting. But Crusoe’s behavior suggests that this account of cognition, in which the only thing that counts is the rational solving of puzzles, leaves us with a very partial, very inadequate account of the relationship he develops with his environment. Left out of readings of Crusoe as a problem-solver is attention to the transformation of the island, the ecological bed of Crusoe’s own blossoming into being. For the novel, in freeing Crusoe of one cold-blooded problem—how to acquire meat after the gunpowder has run out—catalogues the change in the state of an ecology, from an island as an ecosystem of one sort to another. Crusoe’s freedom is only one effect of these more general changes; indeed, his freedom itself institutes the sort of blindness that readings of Crusoe tend to repeat, dividing a network into two entities: a rational actor and his environment.

This sets up what is perhaps the most remarkable line in the book, which suddenly reverses the trajectory of the plot; the island, which had previously only appeared to be a proving ground or veil of tears for Crusoe’s hard-won individualism becomes instead its object and lesson. “Though I had sold my estate in the Brazils,” he remarks, “yet I could not keep that country out of my head, and had a great mind to be upon the wing again; especially I could not resist the strong inclination I had to see my island.” Having escaped the island, which by most accounts stands only as a sounding-board or mirror for himself, he returns. “I had once a Mind to have gone to the *Brasils*,” Crusoe had a few pages earlier admitted, “and have settled my self there; for I was, as it were, naturaliz’d to the Place.” Crusoe returns—but this is a return with a difference. Crusoe’s first voyage is journey without a cause; he could not have said that he “had... a Mind to have gone to the *Brasils*” the first time, for he hardly reports having a mind at all; it is only under the

sign of the return that he could be said, paradoxically, to seek out the site of his enislement. He has constructed a place as a proving ground for himself, and left it behind as though it were a prison. He discovers, however, that as the place was part of, rather than merely the stage for, his cognitive transformation, it dwells with him still. This is what he calls his “naturalization”; his naturalization is the internalization of country and island, its installation “in [his] head” which implies his reinstallation as its inhabitant. It is under the sign of his own transformation that he becomes a caretaker of the island.

I have been sketching out the process whereby *Robinson Crusoe* captures the production of an individual as the product of a complex network of persons and things. Crusoe’s emergence as an intelligence, compact to itself, is accompanied by what would seem, in the terms of Crusoe’s sense of himself, to be its opposite—the “inclination” to return. The paradox this sustains is in some ways the sign of modernity; Crusoe returns as a curator of the island, but a curator in such a way that he disavows his many debts to the ecology in which his sense of himself took its rise. It is worth in this context remembering the etymological nearness of economy and ecology; though we have arrived at a point where the economic actor and the ecological actant would seem to be diametric opposites, each descends from the same root, voicing an interest in home. In one case, under the sign of economic behavior, we are concerned with the arts of stewardship, of the management of household affairs; in the other, it is a question of concern for the home, a way of writing or addressing oneself towards it. Either scenario, whether it stages an economic actor running an “infinite-life discounted utility maximizing program,” or an ecological actant comfortable in his adapted niche, would appear to be founded on practices of caretaking. Crusoe is a home-maker; it is a question of settling or dwelling there. And in this sense, far from articulating what is merely the relationship between colonizer and colonized, or conqueror and conquered, Crusoe’s perilous voyage to self-awareness has all along been naming a species of entanglement.