

Autonomy: Fact or Fiction

In Western society (specifically in the United States) there has existed an idea since the colonial days that any individual, despite their class in the motherland, can achieve wealth and prosperity through hard work and determination alone. This idea has been commonly referred to throughout history as the myth of autonomy, because so many have tried it and failed. While not originally created as a myth, it was an idea that could give those trying to escape either religious persecution, monarchy rule, or an unfortunate lot in class structure a chance to become independently wealthy and part of an upper class where no upper class as of yet existed (the British colonies). However, this idea became a myth when it was realized that as long as there was a ruling body governing from a distance (England) and making all the rules to live by—from common law to business taxation—there was no chance to become independently wealthy unless birth had already dictated it. Thus, the myth of autonomy was born. Surprisingly, after the Revolution, the myth of autonomy was revived and in fact became somewhat possible for even those of the lowest class.

In Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, this myth of autonomy is alive and well. Crusoe is able to break away from his station in England and achieve independent prosperity on his island for twenty-eight years (as well as his later wealth due to his plantations in Brazil). Interestingly, he is only able to achieve this autonomy once the rule of the monarchy is completely lost from his life. There arises, however, a conflict between this autonomy and Crusoe's faith that God has intervened many times to save his life since he first washed up on the island. By examining this conflict in terms of certain aspects of autonomy and faith (such as pride versus humility and self-reliance versus gratitude), there is a much larger connection between capitalism and asceticism that

arises. Looking at both of these, a greater understanding can be attained as to just how the conflict and the connection contributed to the myth of autonomy in the novel and in the people of the day.

Pride and humility are two emotions that have been at odds since the beginning of mankind; as it is said, pride cometh before the fall. It is therefore preached by many (both religious and secular individuals) that humility is required to have lasting success. But, when one achieves something great, it is only natural and acceptable to take pride in it. This is quite common in *Robinson Crusoe*, as Crusoe takes nothing but pride in achieving a stable life on his island through his own devices alone. He expresses this best as he lists all of the tribulations he went through to build his original shelter:

“Into this Fence or Fortress, with infinite Labour, I carry’d all my Riches, all my Provisions...I made me a large Tent, which, to preserve me from the Rains...And now I lay no more for a while in the Bed which I had brought on Shore, but in a Hammock...and having thus enclos’d all my Goods, I made up the Entrance, which till now I had left open, and so pass’d and repass’d, as I said by a short ladder,” (Defoe, 45).

Humility is lost, especially when Crusoe starts declaring himself King and Lord of the island, and the fall of pride never arrives. This greatly adds to the myth of autonomy, as Crusoe achieves great things and prosperity-and knows it-yet there are no negative consequences to this. He becomes a lord, gains great wealth, and is even rescued (albeit a bit late, but it still happens). Everything goes his way with no need for humility. In a time when very few were actually successful in achieving this type of wealth, the tale of Robinson Crusoe would have acted as a catalyst for more individuals to at least try to attain the dream.

Another well-known and often debated conflict between autonomy and faith is that between self-reliance and gratitude. This conflict, on a more religious level, is basically the age old debate over whether or not there is a God and if there is, what power

He holds of an individual's life. Crusoe brings this debate to the forefront: he praises God for his salvation on the island, for bringing him the ship that leads to his rescue, for many of the things that happen in his everyday life after he has sufficiently set himself up on the island, such as when he washed back up on shore after sailing around the island to reach his house: "When I was on Shore I fell on my Knees and gave God Thanks for my Deliverance," (103). Yet, when it came down to it, he relied solely on his own devices to survive and builds his successful new life. God doesn't give him anything, he does it all on his own. So, Crusoe's situation provides support to the idea that perhaps God has no power over the things that occur in the lives of men. Self-reliance is really the only way to achieve anything. When it is broken down as such, the conflict all but states that the myth of autonomy is not only plausible but possible. Autonomy comes first and foremost from being able to achieve wealth without help from anyone or anything. It is attained by one's hard work and by knowing that the only person who can help in achieving success is one's self. To know that it was possible for Robinson Crusoe to get so much by relying only on himself and pushing gratitude off to the side (and calling on it only when he felt it was absolutely necessary, or when he felt he needed to go through the motions of having retained faith on his island) would have spurred the myth of autonomy forward. "This Day I went to Work with it accordingly, and got two Shores or Posts pitch'd upright to the Top, with two Pieces of Boards a-cross over each Post...and setting up more Posts up with Boards, in about a week more I had the Roof secur'd and the Posts standing in Rows, serv'd me for Partitions to part of my House," (55). Here, Crusoe applies carpentry skills he may not have realized he had to secure his house after a cave in. Even though it was a novel, anyone could have recognized that if a fictional character

could have achieved so much on an island, imagine what someone could do in a major city in a new land with all the devices of society at their disposal.

Looking at how faith and autonomy have clashed in the novel (with autonomy coming out as the clear winner), a much broader connection has been revealed between the accumulation of wealth and the work ethic of an individual. This is the [once] commonly held idea that capitalism cannot exist without asceticism. While this has changed somewhat throughout history (with capitalism finding its old roots once again in generational wealth among families), for the most part, it remains the connection. Crusoe is able to achieve a capitalistic society purely by ascetic means. It is his hard work alone that gives him this unimaginable wealth in a place where money has no value and the only other people are cannibals. However, this connection itself is what originally created the myth of autonomy, and when the connection is applied to Western society in the strictly basic form that it is presented in the novel, a few problems arise that again show why autonomy became a myth in the first place. Capitalism is easy for Crusoe to achieve because he is the only individual in his society. He is Lord and laborer; he commands all and receives all wealth. This is fine for a one-man show, but in Western society things do not work so basically. Karl Marx even tried to apply what Crusoe accomplished to Western society: "Let us now picture to ourselves...a community of free individuals...in which the labour-power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour-power of the community. All the characteristics of Robinson's labour are here repeated, but with this difference, that they are social, instead of individual," (Marx, 90). Capitalism relies heavily on the interactions one has with other people. The constant trading of goods and the buying and selling of services is

what drives capitalism. Without both of these processes in a multiple person society, capitalism cannot exist, and if capitalism cannot exist then asceticism amounts to absolutely nothing. As Ian Watt said, “He owns freehold, an estate which is rich, though unimproved...the shipwreck, which is supposed to be a retributive disaster, is in fact a miraculous gift...and one rendered particularly felicitous by the death of all the other passengers,” (Watt, 107). Someone can work as hard as is humanly possible, but without the interaction with others, nothing will be gained. This application is what ultimately breaks the idea of autonomy and turns it into a myth. If there has to be trade with others, then self-reliance is gone, and with it often goes the pride of men. Therefore, while there is indeed a strong connection between capitalism and asceticism, the idea of how these two connect has to be adjusted if autonomy of any kind is going to exist in multi-person societies.

So, the myth of autonomy, while very tempting to many since the European powers began their colonization, is no more than that: a myth. Even with hard work and self-reliance, for capitalism to take off, there has to be trade with other people. While Robinson Crusoe may have been able to achieve autonomy, this comes more from his single person society than from autonomy actually being possible. The only time that autonomy was somewhat possible was just after the Revolutionary War, when the United States started its westward expansion. With the discovery of new land, new resources, and new means of transportation, some individuals were able to achieve great wealth through their efforts. But, in the end, the wealth had to come from somewhere else, since resources in their own right have no real value (save gold). So, even when things had not been discovered, those who did come across them still had to get their wealth through

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commerce with others. All of this shows that while autonomy and faith may be at odds, there is really no strict autonomy, and in order to achieve wealth, faith has to be pushed to the side. In the end, neither idea wins.

Works Cited

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