SHIPWRECK, IMPERATIVE AND GRATITUDE

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ABSTRACT

Setelah terdampar di sebuah pulau yang tak dikenal, Robinson Crusoe menghabiskan banyak waktu untuk memperkuat kelangsungan hidupnya dalam lingkungan baru dan aneh. Dia juga membayangkan bagaimana keadaannya jika dia tidak mendapatkan apapun dari peristiwa karamnya kapal itu — sebuah gambaran yang dapat diterapkan pada pengalaman hidup kita sebagai *kapal karam* di suatu tempat dan bukan di tempat lain. Dengan rasa syukur atas apa yang dia miliki dan imperatif untuk bertahan hidup, Robinson Crusoe membentuk masa depan dari puing-puing keadaannya yang tidak menguntungkan. Gambaran Crusoe tentang kapal karam, imperatif untuk bertahan hidup dan rasa syukur menyediakan situs gabungan untuk memahami kehilangan dan kemungkinan manusia di tengah puing-puing bangkai kapal kehidupan. Setelah mendarat di suatu tempat di tengah begitu banyak puing-puing, ada konteks dan hal-hal di mana kehidupan dijalani menuju sebuah horison dalam rasa syukur dan pemikiran yang dapat menafsirkan dan menerka secara kreatif menuju masa depan.

Kata Kunci: Robinson Crusoe, *kapal karam*

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To be human is to be cast into a particular time, place and possibilities—here and not there, in this time and not another. We are shipwrecked on this island and not another, from this ship and its wreckage and not some other—castaway for who knows how long. We are washed up somewhere on the shore of human life—with specific ethnic, historical and cultural identity. Birth and context can seem like a shipwreck in time that has left us survivors on a particular shore, surrounded by debris with its specific assets for the challenge of life.

Robinson Crusoe's survival within a new and strange environment is enhanced by gratitude for every item he has salvaged—odd tools, broken items and debris—which he uses with inventive imagination. He cultivates hope around what his circumstances now present, instead of what he has been deprived. He cannot reverse time to unravel his predicament. Shipwrecked, he is now arbitrarily here. Even if by one day at a time, he must

live toward the future in order to survive. Within his precarious circumstances, regret and despair would be fatal; optimism, nurtured by gratitude, is crucial. If occasionally, in his shipwrecked circumstance, Crusoe is suddenly overwhelmed by inconsolable anguish, he is nevertheless intent on forging a future within the island and if possible, creating the means of again living beyond it. Crusoe explores and charts his island world, meticulously appropriating its resources. While he has recurring dreams of leaving, ultimately, he is intent on making of his island a home.¹

METHOD

The shipwreck image is applicable to human life in its various states of crisis, debris and purposeful futurity. There is also the reality for every human person of being *shipwrecked* somewhere and not elsewhere, amid specific contingencies that become tools and resources for survival. This is life and it is experienced variously but similarly by people everywhere.

An aphoristic mode is appropriate to a scene of debris, whereby fragments become useful tools for survival and making sense of a context with random contingencies. An aphorism, like a fragment of shipwreck debris that has been washed up on a seashore, can provide a crucial qualitative image for engaging life with imperative energy toward the future, while such imperative is undergirded by gratitude for life as it has unfolded to the present. Out of gratitude, each fragment of retrieved debris becomes part of a composite inventory for inventive use within the shipwreck of human existence; our capacity to think and theoretically conjecture an inventive future—to interpret—necessarily complements aphoristic observations and images.

Within our capacity to think, we posit and test interpretations of experience and observation, especially seeming riddles of human experience (Popper).² The image of *shipwreck* articulates several paradoxes of human existence—that is, we are seemingly shipwrecked somewhere, while there is debris, inventory and creativity; yet toward what horizon and by what impetus? By what thetic interpretation is life and the future engaged from the point of

¹ Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed., intro. & notes John Richetti (London: Penguin, 2001); Defoe, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe Written by Himself*, intro. & notes Doreen Roberts (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1995, 2000).

² Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 43-86; Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992, 2002); 37-73; Popper, *The Two Fundamental Problems of the Theory of Knowledge*, ed. Troels Eggers Hansen, trans. John Kinory & Andreas Pickle (London & New York: Routledge, 2009) 7-34.

shipwreck—that is, our recognition of shipwreck? Aphoristic expression of observation and experience is engaged within an impetus of gratitude and by thetic conjecture and trajectory toward a particular horizon. We are both aphoristically inclined in casting life in digestible fragments, yet as thetically cast in conjecture and interpretation as to their impetus and meaning; conjecture and interpretation are in turn tested by practical engagement with life that is qualified by gratitude and ingenuity. This article, *Shipwreck, Imperative and Gratitude* is situated amid existential debris, utilising fragments retrieved from the shipwreck of life by living with gratitude for what has been retrieved in meeting urgent necessity, thinking creatively toward an optimistic future.

1. Shipwrecked

To exist is to be cast into a *passive* stance (Ebeling)—here not there, in this time not another—shipwrecked within a family and culture, as always surrounded by debris.³ Within the variegated *givens* of our castaway context—apparent deficits and potential opportunities—the crucial factor is our *active* response.

We happen to land somewhere in life, *here* and not there, *now* and not then, within a context with significant aspects that are specifically given—such as family, culture, abilities and opportunities. This is human embodiment not determinism. Our existence is arbitrarily contextual. Every person is cast into a specific culture, time and place, not elsewhere in another time. Why then, do we surmise that we might have been more fortunate in different circumstances? We might be less endowed with gifts, resources and opportunities than present circumstances offer. *Shipwrecked* in a particular time and place, benign or difficult, there is always a context. Hope is nurtured by creative engagement with the circumstances into which we are thrust. This may seem obvious, yet to yearn for conditions that do not exist is to scuttle hope and be twice shipwrecked.

Having been thrust into an arbitrary time and place, there are numerous diversions from reflecting on the astonishing reality of having been cast within *a time* that could be any time from antiquity and plunged into *a place* that could be any location on the globe.⁴ Why am I in this time and place, not elsewhere in another time? This is a tacit question for any person, for everyone exists within a particular time and place. If the historical time and cultural region of my existence is arbitrary (as here, now, instead of being elsewhere, then), there is nothing more or less significant to being in one time and place than any other. Our response to life within such a seemingly arbitrary occurrence

³ Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM, 1963) 350.

⁴ With reference to Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, intro. & trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1995) 198.

is here crucial. Is a meaningful response ultimately only possible in recognition that the entirety of existence is a gift and not chance?

2. Navigation

Siblings represent an arbitrary phenomenon as to number, order and spacing. Their different life trajectories, begun within shared circumstances, are incalculable. A family is an arbitrary context of time, place and parents. We are cast amid family dynamics that we navigate for a lifetime. Similarly, we navigate tribes and culture. It is seemingly incumbent on us to lament some lack in our lives due to parents, siblings, time, place or culture. But what does this mean if the alternative is not to exist at all? Without gratitude for life we are effectively, even if tacitly, yearning not to have existed.

We are distinctive among the living because volitionally, we can intend possibilities and we have conscientious responsibilities.⁵ Each person attends to life with intentionality, calculation, caution, risk, spontaneity and reticence. While each person has a genealogy, constitution and talent, some maximise their limited possibilities, while others squander their gifts; some diminish while others enhance human dignity. Some people merge with a tribe, becoming indistinguishable from particular tribal attitudes and activities; each responds to the idiosyncrasies of conscience, whether sharp with imperative and so distinction or tepid amid conflicting demands that are allayed within ambivalence. As volitional, each is distinctive among others; distinctions occur within responsibilities engaged.

Responsibility can be neglected, deferred or embraced, regardless of the relative mores of society. Responsibility expressed within a particular commitment is freer than potentially diminished responsibility that is grafted to tacit values inculcated within a specific tribe. If human possibilities are maximised by responsibility, these possibilities are also variously scuttled through anxiety, as each tribe also plays an inadvertent role in diminishing integral possibilities by offering self-preserving options. While tribal allegiances can diminish our possibilities, human life is enhanced through responsibility with and among others by sustained generosity and veracity.

3. Imperative

Shipwrecked for an indefinite duration, Robinson Crusoe constructs a calendar of his passing time on the island by notching each day on a post,

⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962, 1999) 65-68.

indicating too, weeks and months that elapse. Without such a calendar, time past can only merge into a single blur consisting of days, weeks, months and possibly years. Without a calendar, he is exposed to time as an abyss into which his life is disappearing. Crusoe's calibration of time past is offset by anticipation of the future, which is also calibrated: today, tomorrow and this week to accomplish specific tasks toward enhancing his conditions of survival; next month or several months to develop incrementally, the means of changing his destiny by leaving the island. Without such calibrated anticipation, Crusoe is before future time that is abyssal as unknown, so threatening to overwhelm his existence. Marked by a rudimentary calendar, the past can offer buoyant memories of progress in projects and their achievement; a future marked similarly, can invoke anticipation of eventful movement within aspirations and their realisation. Without a calendar by which to calibrate past and future, neither possibility exists. So too, calibrated time is intrinsic to our initiatives, responsibilities and commitments among others.

If understanding is sought by looking back and interpreting the known, life is nevertheless lived toward a future that reserves much that is unknown. Human experience of time is a movement from known to unknown.⁶ Reversal of this movement is sought in assimilating the unknown to what is known and assumedly secure. Before an encroaching future, thrust into new situations among unknown others, past scripts have to be improvised. Honed skills from past experiences may be familiar; new circumstances are not so familiar. Human crises make explicit this perennial tension; the future always brings unexpected difficulties. The future is presumably redeemed by reference to the past. Many scripts of reflection and knowledge are never superfluous, yet their immediate deployment before an unfolding future is necessarily dialectical. A backward and analytical gaze can freeze before future possibilities. Meeting the future with encyclopedic retrieval of the past can be unwieldy and is invariably tardy in response; *after dusk*, understanding arrives slightly too late for the day⁷; the past always arrives too late for the future. Yet the past can be evaluated as a gift that was also once received as an unfolding future.

4. Horizon

The edge of the world is no longer a spatial horizon over which ships can fall; but it is a temporal one. Falling off the edge can occur in two directions—past

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, trans. into & notes, Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1996) 537-538.

⁷ Hegel, Introduction, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

and future. Someone's past may cease to recede away like a road travelled but instead, drop away like steps falling from beneath a cartoon character being pursued. Falling off the edge is also possible in relation to the future, within a mere footstep, as time opens onto a precipice. Impetuses of past and future represent two directions in which people now fall off the edge of a world. Any engagement with past and future also implicates the present.

To change the present by intervening in the past would also change the present out of which one desires to change the past; having changed the past, we may have new reasons for changing the present. This would be a recurring loop.⁸ If we could change the past, would we change it in any way that is different from the past we once experienced? Would a different present be satisfactory, or would that too, cause us to want to change the past? On revisiting a past decision it would, as previously made with best intentions, seem to be right.

While depicting a shipwreck and the necessity of resourceful ingenuity on a remote island, *Robinson Crusoe* is an extended parable presenting a new perspective of providence. Crusoe's reflections on survival are cast as an emerging modern mode of futurity wherein enlightened reason, material resources and industry now represent any feasible providence.⁹ Yet this image need not alienate a Christian theme of providence whereby the embodiment of christological generosity and veracity forms a human network of providential ingenuity and care amid humanity that is always before an unknown future, possessing only the debris of a particular shipwreck on the shore of present life. A particular aspect of participating in such providence is gratitude for our particular debris within an astonishment of survival—that *I exist*, in this time and place, without having made this decision.

5. Astonishment and gratitude

Astonished to be here and not there, now and not then! Who made this arbitrary decision concerning my existence?¹⁰ If specific existence is by chance, then is not everything merely chance? If by intention, is not everything surrounding us a testimonial to purpose? These two possibilities are implicit within all other valuations of life. We link any inklings of uniqueness with

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2003) 134.

⁹ Ian Watt, "Robinson Crusoe as a Myth," *Daniel Defoe: A Collection of Critical Essays, A Norton Critical Edition of Robinson Crusoe*, Second Edition, ed. Michael Shinagel (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994) 288-306; John J. Richetti, "Robinson Crusoe: The Self as Master," *Norton Critical Edition of Robinson Crusoe*, 357-362.

¹⁰ Pascal, *Pensées*, § 68.

inhabiting a place and a time, even if our circumstances have difficulties. Yet beyond genes and ethnicity as parentally conferred, how do we comprehend intentionality concerning the specific existence of each? On what do we ground uniqueness, even among siblings? Accounting for personal existence merely by chance can only diminish any sense of life having intended significance. Yet if specific existence is intended, this poses an ethical issue: why the differences in possibilities for each? The reality of different possibilities invokes a tacit theological aspect: by what impetus have some with lesser possibilities found joy, while others are grumpy within seemingly greater possibilities? How is relative possibility even measured if all existence is a gift and perceived to be unique when received with gratitude? We would only know an intentional gift by receiving a particular word of generosity that articulates this reality.

What we think we do not have is usually relative to what we presume others have. Gratitude for life is fundamental to our existence. Despite feasible deficits that could be claimed, gratitude will always make something of seeming nothing. Gratitude is creative with the smallest fragments of beneficence and enjoyment. Gratitude gives what we have received—gifts, resources, possibilities and joy. Without gratitude, we do not recognise what we have received but instead, hanker after a hypothetical existence with conjectured gifts, resources, possibilities and happiness. That the one who *has* will *receive more* has a haunting, inverse possibility. What we presumably lack is usually relative to what we presume others have. Gratitude refuses to make this calculation. Gratitude for life is intrinsic to genuine optimism and contentment. Gratitude will always make something of seeming nothing, so exhibiting discreet creativity, even with the smallest fragments of our shipwreck debris.

CONCLUSION

Having been shipwrecked on an unknown island, Robinson Crusoe spends much time consolidating his survival within a new and strange environment. He also imagines what his circumstances might be if he had retrieved nothing from the shipwreck—an image that is applicable to our experience of life as being *shipwrecked* somewhere and not anywhere. By gratitude for what he has and imperative toward survival, Robinson Crusoe shapes a future from the debris of his unfortunate circumstances. Having landed somewhere amid so much debris, there is a context and stuff by which life is lived toward a horizon within gratitude and thought that can interpret and conjecture creatively toward a future. The Crusoe images of shipwreck, survival imperative and gratitude provide a composite site for engaging human loss and possibility

amid the shipwreck debris of life. They also provide an image of providential care that is wholly contiguous with Christian embodiment of ingenuity exhibited by generosity and veracity amid humanity. The crucial aspect to enacting and receiving such providence in human interaction is wonder—concerning shipwreck survival, here, now, that is met with gratitude and so space for creative ingenuity before an unknown future.

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