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CASUISTICAL CONNECTIONS FROM DUNTON TO DEFOE

by

John E. Fossum

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

CASUISTICAL CONNECTIONS FROM DUNTON TO DEFOE

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This master's thesis is primarily concerned with the philosophical conditions of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England that encouraged the emergence of periodical literature and perpetuated the birth of the novel. While most connections between periodical literature and the novel are made on how the former created the readership that ensured the latter's success, I focus on how the epistemology unique to the advent of empirical science together with the growing prominence of casuistic thought created a space in which periodical literature could emerge and the early novel could flourish. I investigate the underlying assertion of a particular philosophical amalgam that I call casuistic-empiricism. Such philosophies encouraged the Renaissance trend that devalued letter-of-the-law thinking, which led ultimately to a significant epistemological transformation in seventeenth-century England.

Recognizing the immensity of this epistemological shift, I focus on the early seventeenth-century practice of casuistry as an outgrowth fueled by seventeenth-century

natural philosophy. By investigating the poetry and prose of John Donne, I emphasize the pervasive threads of casuistic thought that found parallels in empirical epistemology. I proceed in a linear fashion by following the evolution and growing pervasiveness of casuistic culture into its period of culmination marked by the birth of the *Athenian Gazette*. Readers' prominent attraction to the periodical is shown to run on a parallel with the incipient empiricism. Indeed, the two prominent lines of thought (empiricism and casuistry) form a dynamic binary where each feeds off of and is fed by the other, culminating in a unique epistemology that aided the emergence of the early novel.

Extending this discussion of periodical literature's casuistical qualities into Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, I investigate how Defoe's ties to casuistry are reflected in and perpetuated by *Crusoe*, illustrating how the novel becomes a medium for resolving cases of conscience. The novel as a genre is shown to be more than just a close relative of the periodical, both genres being spurred into prominence by some of the more salient features attendant to casuistic-empirical philosophy. The novel becomes finally a type of culminating product of a unique casuistic-empirical practice that accounts for the full range of experiences involved in reaching justified conclusions.

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Chapter One

Seventeenth-Century Casuistic Philosophy and the New Epistemology

Chapter One

Seventeenth-Century Casuistic Philosophy and the New Epistemology

“I have to forge every sentence in the teeth of irreducible and stubborn facts.”

— William James

“The new mentality is more important even than the new science and the new technology. It has altered the metaphysical presuppositions and the imaginative contents of our minds; so that now the old stimuli provoke a new response.”

— Alfred North Whitehead

I. Introduction and Forecast

In his famous introduction to *History of English Literature* (1863), Hippolyte Taine declared that “it is a mistake to study [a] document as if it existed alone by itself. [...] A literary work is not a mere play of the imagination, the isolated caprice of an excited brain, but a transcript of contemporary manners and customs and the sign of a particular state of intellect” (1-2). This same sentiment is echoed by Stephen Greenblatt who averred that a work of art “is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society” (12). In this manner, a literary work serves a dual purpose as both a product of a particular milieu and as a producer and maintainer of those same social, political, or otherwise historical attributes. To use Walter Watson’s term, I view literature as “diaphanic” or “through-showing” (27), conceding that ultimately it is not merely the authors who speak, but also something else that speaks through them (Watson 30). That “something else” in this discussion is a unique epistemology that was created when traditional casuistic philosophy met with empiricism that emerged in late seventeenth-century England. Casuistry

and empiricism formed a dynamic relationship in which the latter necessitated subtle yet noteworthy shifts in the former, and ultimately fashioned a distinctive epistemological space in which the periodical and early novel could both emerge and flourish. This new epistemology was one that promoted a socially inclusive and communal approach to knowledge production. It also reflected society's discontent with traditional modes of reasoning that relied heavily upon a cut-and-dried Platonic system of moral absolutes. An increased casuistic awareness of the divergent nature of individual experience was combined with a growing empirical understanding concerning the complexities of the natural world. This combination led to a type of hybrid casuistic method that valued a multiplicity of first-hand experiences and detailed considerations concerning the intricacies of everyday cases of conscience.

In this introductory chapter, I seek to establish the connection between casuistic philosophy (which had reached its maturity by the mid-sixteen hundreds) and the burgeoning empiricism of the same era. As similar outgrowths of a general mindset of enlightenment, I intend to show how casuistry gleaned from empiricism the requirement to achieve credible solutions to problems through a hyper-detailed, inductive consideration of the intricacies of multiple individual experiences. Previous to the rise of empirical thought, a casuist would have been content with an appeal to the documented and authoritative cases of conscience transcribed by the "Holy Fathers." A traditional casuist would have appealed to the documented cases in order to deduce whether or not their particular impasse was comparable enough to be similarly resolved. But the rising empiricism exploited as insufficient the tendency to rely on these sanctioned generalities, and it effected a subtle change in the casuistic method. Casuistic practitioners for centuries would simply refer to the recorded

cases of casuistic justification found in what was called the *Penitentials* in order to find a case that shared the characteristics of their own, and then act accordingly. But with the epistemological upheaval that attended the advent of empiricism came the need to adjust this method of justification.

I begin the chapter by briefly tracing a history of casuistry, noting its key characteristics and primary contributors while demonstrating how it reflected a renaissance mindset that diverged from traditional modes of what we might call absolutist reasoning. By focusing specifically on William Perkins (the acknowledged father of British casuistry) and Blaise Pascal (the most prominent mid-seventeenth-century opponent of casuistry), the elements of traditional casuistic methods are identified. I then provide a short consideration of John Donne's poetry and prose, casting his literary works as a case study in which I illustrate how the pervasive nature of casuistic philosophy had permeated the public sphere and begun to shape the literature of the early seventeenth century. I then briefly trace the seventeenth-century rise of empiricism, which emerged as a close cousin to casuistry, and I explore the key similarities and differences between the two, focusing specifically on what changes empiricism brought about in the casuistic method. By investigating the philosophies of Francis Bacon and the ostensibly casuistic practices of Robert Boyle Thomas Sprat, I trace the rise of an experience-based epistemology from Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* (1605) to the establishment of the Royal Society (1662). This background is relevant inasmuch as it elucidates the conditions that encouraged the mid-seventeenth-century confluence of casuistic and empirical thought, a philosophic amalgam that ultimately set the stage for John Dunton's *Athenian Gazette or Casuistical Mercury*.

II. Casuistry's Rise

Many trace the roots of casuistic theory back to ancient Rome and Greece. In his *Introduction to Ethics*, David Gray observes that while individuals like Plato were dependent upon “the existence of universal principles by which all situations can be judged, based on a *timeless and unchangeable* vision of the good” (255, my emphasis), others, such as Cicero later averred that “we need to consider ‘what is most needful in each individual case,’ and that different circumstances should be carefully scrutinized in every instance” (256). The meaning of the word *casuistry* is literally “concern with individual cases” (Stark 257). By recognizing the need to consider the intricacies and particularities unique to the forces brought to bear at a particular moment, casuistry was born.

Until the sixth century, casuistry existed only as a general mindset that recognized that the application of law was tricky. But beginning in the sixth century and culminating in the tenth, there arose a revitalized interest in casuistic philosophy as clergymen began to write the *Penitentials*—a series of volumes that cited historic cases of conscience along with their resolutions that could be used as paradigms against which could be judged contemporary moral conflicts. The use of penitentials was a practice that characterized the Christian era and was officially employed by Catholic priests as a means for reconciling penitent sinners to the favor of God through dismissing Ascetic doctrines that emphasized the rigidity and universality of law. Werner Stark observes that in many ways casuistry emerged as a “logical and political complement and corrective” to the governing ideology of Ascetics that emphasized “absolute propositions which time and space would not, should not, and could not modify” (260). The goal of the “father confessor” (to whom confessions were made) became primarily to educate the sinner into more favorable modes of action rather than see him or her sentenced to the infernal realms. Thus discussions of “cases of

conscience” filled medieval literature as more people began to accost priests for enlightened tutorials concerning moral justification of acts that were previously viewed as unquestionably damning. The growing allure of casuistry placed its practitioners in a challenging position of attempting to do their job of proffering hope to the penitent sinner without granting license for illicit behavior in the future. The *Penitentials* served the church well for centuries and until the 1500s were still in common use as people continued to measure the morality of their actions against previous cases.

Along with the rise of the Jesuit order in 1541 came another resurgence of attention explicitly given to casuistic philosophy. Casuistry as it was employed by the Jesuits was called “High Casuistry.” The Jesuits’ injunction to serve both church and state provided a fertile atmosphere for casuistic practice as they strove to mitigate the inherent conflicts of their interdisciplinary position. Jonsen cites in his *Abuse of Casuistry* that “the Jesuits were the first fully ‘worldly’ religious community, bound by the traditional vows, but mandated to work among secular persons in secular institutions” (147). Therefore, casuistic philosophy became an appropriate tool for the use of the Jesuits in accomplishing their aim to serve the interests of both the secular and sacred.

By the mid 1500s, there were numerous volumes of recorded cases of conscience that had become paradigms to which people would juxtapose their own experiences in order to achieve moral and spiritual resolution concerning difficult issues. Keenan observes that the Jesuits were in dire need of such strategies in moral mitigation due to a fundamental shift in perceptions of confession and personal piety (107). The evangelizing practices of sixteenth-century England instigated a frequent reception of and renewed emphasis on the sacrament of confession: “The Jesuits summoned their listeners to an examination of their lives so as to

encounter God's mercy and to hear the call of Christ." In this invitation to "encounter God's mercy" (something that only a justified sinner could do), confessors were suddenly compelled to be their own comforters (Keenan 107) as they strove to reach resolution through appealing to documented precedents. As a result of this shift, the study of specific cases of casuistry was incorporated into the daily routine of Jesuits, who spent at least an hour a day immersed in casuistic philosophy, or "cases of conscience" (O'Malley 147) in order to bolster their familiarity with the vast repertoire of casuistic cases. James Keenan has observed that "sixteenth-century thinkers turned to casuistry due to the inability of existing principles to cope with emerging 'new' situations" (107). These volumes of penitentials (despite their productive use for so many centuries) began to be viewed as incapable of accounting for the complexities brought about by modern explorations into the new world, trade with the east, and (as we will see later) the rise of empirical thought. But more importantly, the church's dependence upon the *Penitentials* was a reflection and appropriation of traditional power models, where members were forced to consider the morality of their actions by placing them in context with the "definitive" cases of the past—a practice that did not recognize the divergent nature of individual lives, and that undoubtedly made some feel like they were simply being "told what to think" (Downie 7).

Amidst this casuistic transformation and revival emerged William Perkins with his uncanny and commonsensical approach to untangling moral complexities through an appeal to principles which transcended the unbending rules of law. His casuistic philosophy "provided a means of adjudicating the conflicting claims of self and law" (Brown 24), and, in his own words, made its practitioners "Embassadors of reconciliation" (Perkins 83). William Perkins was perhaps the most influential luminary in introducing casuistic

methodology to the general public in England. While he was a self-proclaimed champion of casuistry, others who inveighed against the practice also ironically aided in circulating the very principles they so adamantly condemned by means of their own literary publications (Keenan 108). Perkins' efforts to emphasize casuistry in humanity's struggle to move beyond the simple letter of the law and to achieve a transcendent moral certitude were liberating to most. His was a casuistry that had begun to slightly change from the traditional mode. Where early casuistry appealed to a particular case as the standard of moral measure, "in later casuistry, the principle, not the case, was the standard of moral measure." In other words, "the case was not the measure, but rather measured" (Keenan 106); or casuistry became an inductive endeavor, taking on the characteristics of an *a posteriori* practice rather than *a priori*. This "measuring" referred to by Keenan took the form of a hyper-detailed consideration of particulars when attempting to establish a governing principle. Hence, certain principles began to transcend and import the particular cases previously viewed as the gauge of morality. We see an example of this philosophy in Perkins' own words from his *Discourse of Conscience*:

Whoever shall *wittingly* and *willingly*, with a *disloyall mind*, either break or omit [...] laws, is guilty of sin before God. [...] Lawes have no vertue or power *in themselves* to constraine conscience, but they binde onely by virtue of an *higher commandment*. 'Let every soule be subject to the higher powers,' Rom. 13:1 [...] which commaundment binds us in conscience to performe obedience to the *good* lawes of men. (33, my emphasis)

The above quote illustrates Perkins' fundamental approach to resolving matters of moral conflict. Someone, for instance, is only guilty of sin before God if he or she

“wittingly” or “willingly” breaks the law, leaving room for hope for the innumerable people who have lived on the earth without a knowledge of God’s commands. By choosing to focus on the motives that underlay actions in order to determine their morality, Perkins dismissed the notion of universal application and enforcement of law. After all, laws were said to possess power only by virtue of “an higher commaundment” to obey the “good” laws of men. That last amendment to his comment surely was timely during the era directly preceding the Reformation in England when social, political, and religious beliefs were in a perpetual state of flux. If any law of the land was construed as not “good,” then no one was under the obligation to follow it, as the “higher commandment” to only engage in that which is good eclipsed any legal obligations to adhere to the law. Hence people began to reach moral contentment through personal application of principles to cases rather than blindly adhering to past cases. They began to recognize their own personal and divine nature to judge and arrive at understanding.

But many had their doubts about the merits of such a practice. Opponents of casuistry feared that its governing precepts could be utilized as fodder for justifying licentious or otherwise impious behavior. When taken to the extreme, casuistic principles were viewed as overly dismissive of the “universal” tenets of religion that had previously dictated the morality of certain activities. By publishing their casuistic directives in Latin, the Jesuits attempted to keep such strategies in moderating moral convolutions from becoming permissive norms, but as noted above, such attempts were short-lived. Despite the attempts to stymie any attempts at circulating their newly embraced ideology, by the end of the seventeenth-century casuistic justification (which had begun to emphasize the application of principles to cases) had become viewed as the “very stuff of daily existence” (Starr viii).

While Rome's authority was being rejected by various reformers, Roman casuistical divinity was being picked, pruned, and rewritten according to the insights of individuals such as William Perkins, William Ames, and Jeremy Taylor who tipped their hats to their Catholic contributors and then moved on (Keenan 109-10). The casuistry of the seventeenth century was one of particulars, not generalized cases; and we shall see that the emergent empiricism of the time played a contributing role.

It is important to note that it was never the casuists' intention to provide license for law-breaking behaviors, but it is easy to see why many people had their doubts about the merits of casuistry. One of the most notable and explicit attacks on casuistic divinity can be seen in Blaise Pascal's *Provincial Letters* (1656), which record the fictional conversations between Pascal's first-person narrator and a Jesuit monk who is a staunch advocate and practitioner of casuistic doctrine. Pascal's critique is ultimately inaccurate as he emphasizes the shortcomings of traditional casuistic philosophy, a philosophy that was rapidly being displaced by the so-called "high casuistry" of the early seventeenth century in England; hence Pascal's work emerges less as timely and more as anachronistic. Yet despite missing the mark with his satire, Pascal's critique accurately points out that there was a growing awareness that the governing tenets of casuistical divinity were in need of revamping. It likewise illustrates a rather ubiquitous assumption that laws were no longer seen as universal, their relevance being determined by the particulars of the attending circumstances — a phenomenon that would culminate (and which we will later examine) in John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury* and Defoe's *Crusoe*.

Throughout the *Provincial Letters*, Pascal's monk explains to his friend the basics of casuistic justification. In arriving at any viable resolution to a moral dilemma, one must base

his or her decision upon what is called a “probable opinion,” or penitential found in the recorded cases of conscience. The monk tries to make it simple for his greenhorn friend: “An opinion is called probable when it is founded upon reasons of some considerations” (Pascal 37)—a consideration, he implies, of the particulars of an occurrence in the life of one of the numerous Holy Fathers of casuistry. Automatically seeing a potential problem with such a philosophy, the narrator queries, “Who can assure me [...] that what appears safe to one may seem so to all the rest? The diversity of judgments is so great” (38). Responding like a true casuist, the monk replies, “Each renders his own opinion probable and safe. [...] A person may do what he considers allowable according to a probable opinion” (38), or an opinion based upon the experience of authorities in casuistic divinity.

Referencing the numerous recorded cases, the monk leads the narrator through justifications of everything from whether or not an individual is required to fast if he or she cannot sleep without first taking supper (Pascal 36) to whether or not one may be justified in deliberately courting sin in certain situations (37). To the latter the monk avers, “We may seek an occasion of sin directly and designedly [...] when our own or our neighbor’s spiritual or temporal advantage influences us to do so” (37). But the most telling and relevant of the examples comes later when the monk endeavors to apply “this grand method in all its glory, as it applies to the subject of homicide—a crime which it justifies in a thousand instances” (52).

Before Pascal’s monk could even commence his discussion of the various justifications for manslaughter, the narrator interrupts, “I foresee already [...] that, according to this mode, everything will be permitted.” The answer that the monk offers explicates a

core principle of casuistic philosophy that we have already seen illustrated by William Perkins:

Just to show you that we are far from permitting everything, let me tell you that we never suffer such a thing as a formal intention to sin, with the sole design of sinning; and if any person whatever should persist in having no other end but evil in the evil the he does, we break with him at once: such conduct is diabolical. (Pascal 52)

The monk continues, “When we cannot prevent the action, we at least purify the motive, and thus correct the viciousness of the means by the goodness of the end” (53). A man may be vindicated in taking another’s life, then, if his intention is based solely upon, say, the defense of his or someone else’s honor, making his actions “quite warrantable.” When asked whether one may justifiably engage in a duel, the monk responds in the affirmative, appealing similarly to the above justification of retaining one’s honor (55). But to this particular question he adds,

There is nothing to prevent one from dispatching one’s adversary in a private way. Indeed, in the circumstances referred to, it is advisable to avoid employing the method of the duel, if it is possible to settle the affair by secretly killing your enemy; for, by this means, we escape at once from exposing our life in combat, and from participating in the sin which our opponent would have committed by fighting the duel! (Pascal 55-56)

Secretly killing one’s enemy in the above-mentioned circumstance becomes a means of saving not only one’s physical life but ensuring the spiritual well being of one’s enemy, leading the narrator to exclaim, “A most pious assassination!” (56).

Letter after letter in Pascal's literary work similarly satirizes the casuistic method made so prominent by the likes of William Perkins who viewed the same practice as "the science of resolving particular cases of conscience through appeal to higher general principles" (Merrill x). Along with questioning the reliability of general categories of knowledge, adherents to orthodox Christianity began to question not only the authority of their ecclesiastical leaders but the veracity of previous strategies for mitigating moral dilemma, whether it be subscribing to the definitive words of Plato or the Holy Fathers. The prescriptive propositions of church leaders in dealing with cases of conflicting morality seemed to ignore the frequently problematic and complex moments of daily life that were only exacerbated by a strict appeal to divine law. Is it moral, for example, to tell the truth in every instance? What if telling the truth jeopardizes the wellbeing of one's family or country? Questions such as this provided a fertile ground for the development of casuistry, or "Practical Divinity" as some called it (Merrill xi). The universality of the law seemed in many cases to deny a prominent Renaissance strain that emphasized the individuality of men and women and their divergent experiences (Cathcart 4). As the "stuff of daily existence," High Casuistry had begun to detach itself from its early form and to consider the minutest of particulars of each circumstance.

This new casuistic method had begun to affect everything from the way in which people dealt with political and religious descent, to what prominent preachers and writers chose to include in their sermons and literary tracts. As an example of the latter, we will turn briefly to John Donne, an early seventeenth-century figure who was a preacher and a writer as well as an adamant casuist.

IV. John Donne: A Brief Case Study in Casuistic Justification

The drastic epistemological transformation that accompanied casuistry's sixteenth- and seventeenth-century resurgence did not occur beyond the notice of the literaries of the time. On the contrary, these monumental changes occurred despite some very heated and pointed objections that originated from some of the more well-known writers of the time such as Blaise Pascal.

In their discussion on the origins and contexts of early casuistic practice, James Keenan and Thomas Shannon proficiently trace the most prominent names and trends of Renaissance and Reformation Europe that perpetuated casuistry's popularity. Intending primarily to provide a "broader sampling of individuals who [...] either cleared the path for or actually used cases to find practical truth in [...] concrete situations," Keenan and Shannon identify three particular influences that amplify the context of casuistry. These influences are "the rise of nominalism in the academy, the importance of preaching in Renaissance and Reformation Europe, and the distinctive contribution of Franciscan sources" (xv). It is on the second of those three influences (the importance of preaching) that I would like to focus in relation to John Donne. Concerning the importance of seventeenth-century preaching as a dominant medium through which the principles of casuistic justification were imbued into the collective psyche of a rapidly transforming public, Keenan and Shannon observe:

The rhetoric of the sermon gave the casuists a vehicle that was seductive and instructive. It lured the reader into resonating with the particularities of the case, and it instructed the reader to find solutions to the case by drawing analogies from similar cases. (xvii)

Beginning with the early Franciscan roots of casuistry, Keenan and Shannon consider the central role of thinkers such as Scotus and Ockham of the Middle Ages in setting the stage for future sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English casuists previously mentioned, such as William Perkins. Despite their purported emphasis on the catechizing practices of the early seventeenth century, it seems strange that they would not include any mention of John Donne, one of the most prominent preachers of his time and an unyielding casuist who was devoted to “the poetry of argumentation.” The literary works of John Donne provide revealing examples of how casuistry was slowly creeping into nearly every facet of people’s daily existence during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England. Through overtly employing casuistry in everything from his poetry to his sermons, Donne shows how casuistry was indeed powering the production of a certain mindset of enlightenment that deeply concerned itself with the singular and divergent nature of individual experience.

Contemporary criticism of Donne’s *Biathanatos* has received little attention for its casuistic features even though it assumes the form of an extended case of conscience more overtly than perhaps any other of Donne’s works. Commonly included among the list of works intended to “advance Donne’s [...] esteem” among his friends and contemporaries (Flynn 336), *Biathanatos* constitutes further a bona fide case of conscience in which Donne argues that “selfe-homicide is not so naturally sinne, that it may never be otherwise” (Donne 1). Drawing from the personal experience of the prominent Calvinist reformer, Theodore Beza, Donne admits likewise to having had the “sickly inclination” to take his own life “whensoever any affliction assails [him],” viewing suicide as “the keys of [his] prison” of hardship and pain (29). Such an unorthodox admittance was not restricted solely to Donne’s

Biathanatos, but the same sentiment is reflected in his famous “Meditation XVI,” exemplifying Donne’s well-known preoccupation with death:

If man knew the gaine of death, the ease of death, he would sollicite, he would provoke death to assist him, by any hand, which he might use. [...] So when these hourelly Bells tell me of so many funerals of men like me, it presents, if not a desire that it may, yet a comfort whensoever mine shall come. (Coffin 444-45)

While the letter of the law was generally viewed to be unequivocal—“Thou shalt not kill”—Donne convincingly argues otherwise. Quoting a “devout and godly man,” Donne repeats, “Thou knowest this mans fall, but thou knowest not his wrastling; which perchance was such, that almost his very fall is justified and accepted of God” (Donne 29). Such an assertion surely must have raised some eyebrows, but Donne’s ultimate premise was one based on the fundamental casuistic principle that underscored the need to recognize the individual and divergent nature of human experience. *Biathanatos* finally becomes not so much a defense of the practice of suicide as much as a sober warning against passing judgment on others without being privy to the intricacies of their situation, something central to the casuist’s agenda. Citing Climachus, Donne quotes, “Though in the world it were possible for thee, to escape all defiling by actuall sinne, yet by judging and condemning those who are defiled, thou art defiled” (30). His underpinning conviction smacks of reformation ideology, condemning the practice of clergymen and philosophers in taking a single verse of scripture and indiscriminately and universally applying it to all:

If any small place of Scripture misappeare to them to bee of use for justifying any opinion of theirs [...] they extend it so farre, and labour, and beat it, to

such thinnesse, as it is scarce any longer the Word of God, only to give their other reasons a little tincture and colour of gold. (Donne 110)

Donne's *Biathanatos*, then, is an invitation to its readers to experiment with "particular cases" of moral conflict, encouraging one to "put [such cases] to any office, and examine, and prove their truth, or likelihood, and make them answer as long as we will aske" (Donne 109). His governing creed was one deeply concerned with embracing the most veritable and unimpeachable solution to any given problem by considering the intricacies of the same: "As in the poole of Bethsaida, there was no health till water was troubled, so the best way to finde the truth in this matter was to debate and vex it" (30). Donne's casuistical argument in relation to the practice of suicide exploited Christianity's hasty inclination to pass an absolute and final judgment on others. He adeptly showed such a condemning predisposition to be inherently non-Christian, stressing instead the transcendence of the principle of charity. His "Meditation XVIII" encapsulates well this theme. In hearing the bell toll outside while resting in his personal chambers during his convalescence, Donne expresses gratitude to him for whom the bell tolls because of the effects that the bell's ringing had on him personally: "I received benefit and instruction from him when his Bell told: and I, being made the fitter to pray, by that disposition, wherein I was assisted by his occasion, did pray for him" (Coffin 447-48). Rather than conjecturing as to the circumstances surrounding the death of the man, whether he was guilty of some heinous malefaction, Donne allowed the moment to instigate a healthy introspection that led him to charitably pray for the man and hope for the man's future salvation. Perhaps Donne summed up this doctrine best in his final sermon, *Death's Duell*, when he said,

Our critical day is not the very day of our death: but the whole course of our life. I thanke him that prays for me when the bell tolles, but I thank him much more that Catechises mee, or preaches to mee, or instructs mee how to live.

(Coffin 584)

As an exercise originally intended to proffer solace for those in spiritual distress, Donne's implementation of casuistry in mitigating religious crises was both timely and revolutionary. It's no wonder that his sermons were noted for their pragmatic immediacy and apropos nature. In this regard, Franco Mormando's final comment concerning the works of Bernardino of Siena (a fifteenth-century preacher) may as easily be applied to the works of Donne:

His constantly invoked exempla, those moral didactic tales drawn from "real life" on which so much of his fame first rested and still rests, are implicit acknowledgments of the fact that a moral discourse that is not fully grounded and realistically related to *the actual, concrete, lived experience of men and women* will never be victorious in its goal of persuading souls to recognize and choose the good. (Mormando 83, my italics)

Donne's was a casuistry deeply rooted in a transcendent self-governance based on the art of doubting wisely. Concerning the empowering nature of an individual, self-sustaining understanding of how one comes to acquire knowledge, Donne stated in his sermon at St. Pauls on Christmas day, 1621, "Knowledge cannot save us, but we cannot be saved without Knowledge; Faith is not on this side Knowledge, but beyond it; we must necessarily come to Knowledge first, though we must not stay at it, when we are come thither" (Coffin 484). To commit to such a casuistic approach of obtaining truth required a mind always open for the

reception of another particle of truth; it meant never being content with one's religious, political, or otherwise moral standing, and refusing to embrace just any religion in order to "escape the pain of debating, and disputing" (Coffin 501). In this regard, Donne's approach to divinity was similar to Francis Bacon's approach to natural philosophy, the aim of both being "to escape the baneful influence of those idols which distort our native perception" (Baker-Smith 410). Donne's *Satire III* is perhaps the best known of his works that perpetuates such a dogma, encouraging one to "[seek] the best" in every facet of life—"to doubt wisely; in strange way / To stand inquiring right, is not to stray; / To sleepe, or runne wrong, is" (Coffin 102). Doubting wisely runs on a close parallel to Scotus's "right reason" which he stated "replaces objective finality as the measure of moral goodness" (Ingham 163). "True religion" for Donne, then, was a condition of the heart, intricately hedged within the principles of seventeenth-century casuistry. It was "the sacrifice of easy consolation and self-justification" that found its fulfillment in the act of discriminating between the human and the divine, or in the search for a future perfection which sprang from Donne's genuine concern with authenticity (Baker-Smith 409, 414). The casuistry of the seventeenth century that concerned itself with the particulars of an occurrence in order to determine its morality was not an independent anomaly, but one that was brought about in large part by a growing popularity of empirical thought and values promulgated in large part by the Royal Society. When viewed in context, casuistry's significant shift from generalized cases to particulars, from *a priori* deductions to *a posteriori* inductions, paralleled closely the underlining tenets of empirical thought (which was simultaneously burgeoning).

V. Francis Bacon and Empiricism's Requirement of First-Hand Experience

It is important to note that while casuistry was evolving and maturing, the philosophical harbingers of empiricism were likewise formulating approaches that diverged from traditional models of acquiring knowledge. In many ways, casuistry and empiricism's parallel development make both practices seem to be related byproducts of the intellectual conditions of the early Enlightenment. Along with a recognition concerning the inherently divergent nature of individual experience in the world (casuistry) came a similar understanding of the complexities of individual observations of and experiences with the physical world (empiricism). In everything from religion and morality to science, "it became increasingly difficult to muster the shared assent that had previously underwritten commonplaces" (Poovey 9).

Contemporary to the casuistical movement was the development of empiricism, which was characterized by an enlightened skepticism that questioned everything from the nature of light to the composition of dung. As empiricism was muddying the waters of consensus, casuistic philosophy was serving a mitigating function in society's attempts to reestablish a collective sense of understanding a world that new empirical findings seemed to be placing in a state of flux. It was a new, more socially inclusive paradigm that insisted on a representative approach in establishing what did and didn't constitute acceptable forms of knowledge. It necessarily refused to affirm or write off any views or insights concerning a matter that may have been put forth by someone simply because of class. It was an approach that privileged the power of personal experience over the wisdom of another, and one that favored vindication grounded in experimental repetition more than in naïve and premature approval of espoused axioms. When considering the complementary role that casuistry played in mitigating the questions brought about by empiricism, it is not surprising that we

see remnants of casuistic thought popping up in the practices of empiricism and vice versa. In many ways, casuistic practices of justification were promulgated as a result of the intellectual conditions fostered by empirical thought. And empiricism seems to have had an influential effect in casuistry's shift from cases to particulars.

Any discussion of the so-called enlightened conditions that set the stage for empiricism's rise and casuistry's subsequent shift from cases to particulars must consider Francis Bacon. His fresh and unconventional approach to the acquisition, nature, and proof of knowledge stood in stark contrast to the predominant ideology of his day, which insisted upon the paramount nature of traditional thought and "right reason," or the automatic deferral to the views and assertions of the philosophical greats such as Plato and Aristotle. But despite the enduring prominence of traditional paradigms, Bacon's revolutionary declaration that *experience* would free human knowledge from the confines and restrictions of conventional philosophy had far too much momentum behind it to be dampened (Renaldo 689). In Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* (1605), he dismissed Aristotelian syllogistic reasoning as insufficient in accounting for the nature of the physical universe, stating, "certain it is that middle propositions cannot be deduced from [universal axioms] in subject of nature by syllogism, that is, by touch and reduction of them to principles in a middle term" (57). He professed elsewhere that "substance of matter is better than beauty of words. [...] For words are but the images of matter" (12). In the same essay, Bacon went on to affirm that "the induction which the logicians speak of, and which seemeth familiar with Plato [...] is utterly vicious and incompetent" (57). We begin to see similarities between the underpinning philosophies of empiricism and casuistry in Bacon's ideas, especially in his focusing on the need to prove axioms through a thoughtful deliberation of an experience's complexity. His

push for empiricism strove to exploit the traditional model for acquiring knowledge in its failure to account for the innately divergent nature of real-life experience in the world, a failure that finally left little to no room for knowledge or experience that may not have been situated within the traditionally established parameters that many viewed as universal.

Bacon accounted for what he saw as erroneous traditional perceptions of universal and unchanging categories of knowledge by identifying four classes of idols—from the Greek *eidolon* meaning “image” or “phantom” (Simpson 8). In his thorough entry in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, David Simpson defines these idols as “characteristic errors, natural tendencies, or defects that beset the mind and prevent it from achieving a full and accurate understanding of nature” (8). The four classes of idols were those of the tribe, the cave, the marketplace, and the theater. The idols of the tribe were “the natural weaknesses and tendencies common to human nature” (8), such as our senses that are inherently dull and easily deceived. According to Bacon, such innate weaknesses could only be recognized and compensated for, not eliminated. Idols of the cave—our inclination to “reduce or confine phenomena within the terms of our own [...] training and discipline” (8) — were not necessarily common to humanity but varied from individual to individual as a result of culture instead of nature. The idols of the marketplace, Simpson continues, “arise [...] from the ‘intercourse and association of men with each other’ [in the form of] special discourses, vocabularies, and jargons of various academic communities and disciplines” (8). And finally, the idols of the theater (which were culturally acquired like the idols of the cave) were derived primarily from “grand schemes or systems of philosophy.” Bacon broke down these philosophies of the theater into three categories: Sophistical (systems based upon a few casually observed instances), Empirical (systems based upon a singular insight that is then

extended into a paradigmatic case to explain phenomena of all kinds), and Superstitious (systems that precariously mixed theology and philosophy) (Simpson 8-9).

By identifying and accounting for the inadequacies of traditional perceptions of what constituted verifiable and dependable knowledge, Bacon hoped to introduce his system of “‘true and perfect induction,’ which he proposed was the essential foundation of scientific method and a necessary tool for the proper interpretation of nature” (Simpson 9). His distrust of the human senses led to his asserting that such deficiencies could be offset by a detailed inductive consideration of the intricacies of multiple experiences, aided in part by the use of various scientific tools such as the microscope or magnifying glass. This process of moving from one piece of knowledge to another only after adequate proving has taken place became known as “the ladder of intellect” in which an axiom was systematically and “thoroughly tested by observation and experimentation before the next step [was] taken” (Simpson 10), leading the individual to the most veracious of knowledge. This “ladder of the intellect” model is seen clearly in the practices of high casuistry which began to emerge at this time and separate itself from the traditional casuistic model of prior ages, suggesting that Bacon’s philosophies were extremely pervasive and characteristic of a common mindset of the time.

Francis Bacon’s pithy aphorism “knowledge is power” is perhaps his best known adage that introduced the empowerment of the everyman through the dissolution of previously unbreachable borders that separated the erudite aristocrat and the provincial plebian. After all, if experience was not a respecter of gender or socioeconomic status, and if knowledge was ultimately contingent upon a fastidious consideration of the details of one’s experience, then anyone willing was enabled to engage in knowledge production. This new type of socially inclusive knowledge was not only based upon Bacon’s complaint of truth-

claims being grounded precariously in “mere words (the Idols of the Marketplace),” but in the self-proclaimed authority of human authors “who have been set up as false gods (the Idols of the Theater)” (Barnaby 63). He charged the scholastic masters with perversely neglecting the supremacy of God and elevating the status of their “opinions” to gain authority over the minds of others (Barnaby 71). Alluding, no doubt, to those who had unreservedly embraced Platonic or Aristotelian philosophy as a basis for decision making, Bacon asserted in his *Advancement of Learning*,

In the inquiry of the divine truth, [traditional thinkers’] pride inclined to leave the oracle of God’s word, and to vanish in the mixture of their own inventions, [...] and adored the deceiving and deformed images which the unequal mirror of their own minds, or a few received authors or principles, did represent unto them. (13)

Bacon saw seventeenth-century England as an era and place in which the philosophical mist of prior ages was clearing up as the collective whirlwind of enlightened humanity exposed previous affirmations as “old wives’ fables, impostures of the clergy, illusions of spirits, and badges of Antichrist, to the great scandal and detriment of religion” (Bacon 14). Under an increasing pressure to ground every conclusion in physical matter and personal observation, it shouldn’t be surprising that “so many excellent philosophers became Sceptics and Academics, and denied any certainty of knowledge or comprehension,” allowing only for “appearances and probabilities” (Bacon 58). It also shouldn’t surprise us that casuistry similarly began to develop an aversion for relying upon the traditional cases of conscience in the *Penitentials* as sole means of moral justification. This endowment of power to experimental science was part of Bacon’s rather unrealized political reform project, as he

ultimately hoped that the participants behind such experimentation would be granted positions in the ruling state power. Yet despite his primary agenda's rather lackluster finish, Bacon still stands as perhaps the single most influential catalyst behind the development in seventeenth-century England of an intellectual climate that favored individual interpretation over tradition, experimentation over abstract thought, and meritocratic principles over aristocratic ones (Garcia 3).

It is no wonder that Robert Boyle, the founding father of the Royal Society in 1663 under a charter by Charles II, submitted Francis Bacon as the society's patron saint—Bacon's words and philosophies being venerated as something akin to scripture. It also shouldn't seem surprising that Boyle's meditative practice of Meletetics reflects element of both empiricism and high casuistry. Previous to the official establishment of the Royal Society and the advent of experimental science, it was held to be "a strange presumption for a man to attempt an innovation in learnings; and not to be good manners, to be more knowing than his neighbors and forefathers" (qtd in Damrosch 2039). But the cultural energy behind the new science of enlightened thought was too great to be deterred by such observations. The Royal Society knew no bounds in its experimentation. Sometimes viewed as laughable and ludicrous, its experiments and expertise traversed the boundaries of astronomy, physics, biology, astrology, and virtually every other field of study. In its first decades, the society's members presented new and verifiable explanations of heat, cold, and light; they created an air pump capable of creating a vacuum; they developed a newly efficient pocket watch, and a revised coherent account of the universe, among other things (Damrosch 2040). Yet equally important to the society's methodological and scientific advancements were its governing ideals that represented a collective departure in seventeenth-century thought from the

classical intellectualism that had been revered for centuries. It was a departure that chose to pursue knowledge of the world through direct experiment, “preferring new data to old theory, the testimony of the senses over the constructs of the intellect” (Damrosch 2040). Surely this extensive departure from traditional modes of thinking served as an impetus behind casuistry’s similar divergence from customary deductive strategies for resolving moral complexities, favoring instead the more inductive approaches previously mentioned.

VI. Robert Boyle’s Meletetics: A Philosophic Blend of Casuistry and Empiricism

Robert Boyle’s contribution to the epistemological mores of his age went beyond championing the new empiricism that both helped to form and was formed by the burgeoning casuistic philosophies of his time. In 1665 Boyle set out to articulate the process by which an ordinary individual might venture to assert meaning in everyday occurrences or observations. Referred to as Meletetics (from the Greek root meaning to *meditate*), Boyle’s *Occasional Reflections* perpetuated the common casuistic practice of discovering transcendent truths through “all that [one] sees happen from the highest Transactions, to the slightest Circumstances, incident to humane affairs” (14), paralleling closely not only fundamental casuistic philosophy but the ideas of Baconian science as well. As a result, Boyle’s philosophy emerged as a unique blend of the casuistic and empirical, which provides a telling example of how the two practices were beginning to merge. He noted the difference between the traditionalists that obtained instruction from books of morality and devotion (such as the *Penitentials*), and contemporary thinkers’ deriving instruction through “occasional reflections” and the “Book of Nature” (18). Concerning this “Book of Nature,” he stated,

The Occasional Reflector has his Library always before him, and his Books lying always open before him, and the World itself, and the Actions of the

Men that live in it, and an almost infinite Variety of other Occurrences being capable of providing Objects of his Contemplation. (15)

This perception of the world and environment as being a school of profound learning empowered any individual that so desired to enjoy “the advantage of learning good Lessons, without the trouble of going to school for them” (Boyle 16). According to Hunter, such a philosophy allowed “even illiterates to create oral meditations on chance objects they might encounter” (201), reflecting Boyle’s core belief that “virtually all knowledge of the world can and should be derived from *personal experience*” (204, my emphasis). Although Robert Boyle did not claim occasional reflections ultimately to be able to net discoveries of the same magnitude as scientists in formal experimentation, his was a unique casuistic empiricism that relied upon an inductive consideration of even the smallest details of one’s plethora of personal experiences.

Yet this seemingly accommodating and inclusive practice of occasional meditations was not free of any noteworthy resistance. Similar to the resistance met by casuistry, such a way of thinking was viewed by many to be narcissistic and self-loving, attempting to empower the faculties of humankind to a degree that stymied one’s appreciation of omnipotent divinity reflected in the wonders of the world. In the first sections of his *Occasional Reflections*, Boyle endeavored to placate such concerns by showing how his proposed meditative practices would not detract from one’s noble approbation of God, but would rather “banish idleness” (4) and “preserve us from harbouring evil Thoughts” (6). Such would lead one “to discover Heavenly wonders, and Incentives to inflame our hearts with Charity and Zeal” (10), as “the very Flowers of [the] Garden” may produce lectures of ethics and divinity (4): “And thus sometimes a little Flower may point us to the Sun, and by

casting our eyes down to our feet, we may in the water see those Stars that shine in the firmament or highest visible heaven” (17), thus pointing our minds and hearts more toward God than if we had never engaged in such an undertaking. These and other justifications earned Boyle the worthy epithet of “Christian virtuoso,” a new public figure that emerged in part as retaliation to priestly accusations of hedonism. Boyle’s *Meletetics* emerged as a unique philosophic amalgam of casuistry and empiricism that characterized “a deliberate decision to make the forwarding of science and pious everyday religious practice seem one and the same thing” (Hunter 205). As we shall see, the popularity of such a mindset climaxed with Dunton’s *Athenian Mercury*.

VII. Sprat’s Casuistic Defense Concerning the Nobility of the Empirical Project

Faced with objections concerning the abandonment of traditional philosophy and morality, the Royal Society commissioned Thomas Sprat to write a *History of the Royal Society* (1664), which was basically an apology (or energetic defense) of the Society’s underlying motives. Sprat’s defense drew from casuistic philosophy and stands as another illustrative moment in which casuistry served a mitigating function in justifying the new empiricism. Sprat maintained that the Royal Society’s endeavors all centered around proposing “an infallible course to make England the glory of the Western world” (79) and insisted upon the deficiency of relying upon traditional ways of thinking in acquiring a factual knowledge of the world. Such conventional strategies, which centered primarily on Aristotelian syllogistic reasoning, were dubbed by Sprat to be insufficiently rooted in nature (17), relying too exclusively on universally condoned axioms (or what Sprat called “airy conceptions”). By appealing to the numerous discoveries that had improved the overall quality of life for society and by appealing to the transcendent importance of glorifying

England, Sprat attempted to justify the Royal Society's overt antipathy toward age-old traditions (something generally viewed as a sort of blasphemy) through appealing to the greater good netted by the Royal Society's assortment of discoveries. This justification is redolent of Pascal's casuistic monk who attempted in all things to "thus correct the viciousness of the means by the goodness of the end" (53).

But Sprat's resistance went beyond what he saw as the ethereal nature of time-honored philosophy. Sprat despised the established scholar/student relationship where it was "onely the Master's part, to examine, and observe; and the Disciples, to submit with silence, to what they conclude" (68). This same aversion is seen in the practices of high casuistry, which broke away from the traditional pattern of the church fathers' imposing authoritative cases of conscience onto the experiences of the confessor. Such a pedagogical and moral models ignored the inclusion and representativeness that Sprat and the casuists saw as absolutely vital to the new paradigm of learning. Redolent of Boyle's *Meletetics*, one of the Royal Society's core statutes read:

The business of [the Society's] weekly Meetings Shall be, To order, take account, consider, and discourse of Philosophical Experiments, and Observations: to read, hear, [...] view, and discourse upon the productions and rarities of Nature, and Art: and to consider what to deduce from them, or how they may be improv'd for use, or discovery. (Sprat 145)

In pondering the numerous observations encountered in nature, Sprat additionally advanced that "we are to overcome the mysteries of all the Works of Nature; and not onely to prosecute such as are confin'd to one Kingdom, or beat upon one shore" (64). Since the broad array of skills and knowledge perceived as necessary to achieve a well-rounded, deep-rooted

understanding of the world would “scarce ever be found in one single Man” (63), the Society was required to include individuals of all countries and religious affiliations. Such efforts of inclusion served to boost the Royal Society’s legitimacy through achieving representation from every possible front; but it also reflected nicely the growing tendency in both casuistry and empiricism to “prosecute” any particular moral dilemma or scientific assertion, and to tease out the most viable conclusions and bits of knowledge through repeated consideration and experimentation from every possible angle.

Sprat’s *History* also reflects an uneasiness concerning clerical objections that attempted to dismiss the Royal Society’s activities as antithetical to Christian doctrine. Again, the pervasive casuistic model of appealing to higher, purer motives was explicitly employed by Sprat to quell such religious anxieties. Sprat insisted “that the Church of England ought not to be apprehensive, of this free converse of various judgments.[...] I shall frankly assert; that [the Church’s] Doctrine, and Discipline, will be so far from receiving damage by it; that it were the best way to make them universally embrac’d” (63). Despite firm resistance to such an idea, the growing number of Royal Society proponents maintained that the intricacies uncovered in the mechanics of life did not have an effect of divine estrangement on those that performed them, but rather increased one’s sense of awe-inspired faith and deference toward God through observing such seemingly incomprehensible complexities. In a move to further legitimize the Society’s efforts with regard to religious tenets, Sprat asserted at one point in his history that there was growing patronage and assistance from churchmen which served to confute “the false opinion that Philosophers must needs be irreligious” (132)—allowing some supporters of the Society to undoubtedly breathe a vindicating sigh of relief. Were it not for the infusion of casuistry into the general mindset

of a seventeenth-century public, empiricism may not have emerged so victoriously. Likewise, were it not for the advent of experimental science, casuistic philosophy may not have enjoyed so much popularity. Casuistry thrives most during times of epistemological restructuring—and that is exactly what seventeenth-century England provided.

VIII. Conclusion and Forecast

By the end of the seventeenth century, most of the overpowering fears that accompanied empiricism's rise had been effectively alleviated through a growing casuistic frame of mind that tended to determine something's worth by appealing to particulars and inducing a transcendent principle that could be found when scrutinizing any given practice. It would be a mistake to view casuistry and empiricism as existing independently within individual epistemological vacuums. Instead, a confluence of the two seems more likely as they formed a dynamic relationship of perpetuation and modification. The enlightened elements of casuistic justification seen implicitly in the works of individuals such as John Donne would crop up later and more explicitly in the casuistic-empirical writings of John Dunton found in his *Athenian Gazette or Casuistical Mercy*.

As traditional casuistic philosophy met with the empirical values of seventeenth-century England, casuistry was directly affected, giving life to a new hybrid philosophic intermingling of the two practices. Not only did casuistry serve an important mitigating function that paved the way for empiricism's emergence, but it assumed certain empirical features in what came to be known as high casuistry. This is most clearly seen in high casuistry's seeming reversal of the traditional casuistic model, shifting emphasis from "authoritative" cases of conscience to the particulars of one's own cache of personal

experiences. Similar to empiricism's dismissal of *a priori* strategies and recognition of *a posteriori* strategies, casuistry had begun to employ Bacon's system of "true and perfect induction" in its resolution of moral dilemmas. In essence, casuistry and empiricism recognized the same dilemma of how one moves from particulars to general principles. This break from traditional deductive models to more progressive and contemporary modes of thinking is seen in both casuistry and empiricism and captures nicely the cultural moment when obsequiously deferring to conventional philosophy was being displaced by recognizing the autonomy and capacity of the individual. This project, then, views casuistry and empiricism as cousin constructs of a particular era in which they both fed and fed off of each other, establishing a distinctive epistemological climate that gave life to the periodical and early novel.

Chapter two will focus on John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury* and how the principle strategies behind the practice of casuistry and empiricism deeply affected not only the content of the periodical but its form as well (a very eclectic question/answer periodical). Throughout the *Mercury* one sees this dynamic relationship between casuistry and empiricism exhibited as Dunton draws explicitly from both practices in an attempt to establish the validity of his periodical. While enlightened conjecture was enough to maintain the popularity of the *Mercury* for a number of years, empiricism's growing prominence began to require a more practical, experience-based resolution in answering difficult questions. Thus the growing acceptance of the new empiricism required a shift in casuistic philosophy, one that integrated logical speculation with empirical fact. I therefore link the rise and the fall of the *Mercury* directly to a collective shift in the casuistical (and

epistemological) orientation of the times and Dunton's failure to conform to the evolving expectations of his seventeenth-century audience.

Chapter three will deal primarily with Daniel Defoe's casuistic connections and how his novel *Robinson Crusoe* was considerably informed by his casuistic tendencies and, by extension, the same governing philosophies that largely influenced the production and promulgation of the periodical. Similar to the periodicity of the *Mercury*, *Robinson Crusoe* takes the appearance of a periodical in its journal entry form. It also parallels the *Mercury* in its content, which was devoted to resolving rather prickly moral dilemmas through a comprehensive consideration of the intricacies of Robinson Crusoe's situation. Defoe's production of *Crusoe* exhibits a realization of audience expectations that yearned for the resolution of cases of conscience through a balanced appeal to both enlightened conjecture and empirically verifiable "truth," a combination that captures at once the philosophical conditions created by both casuistic and empirical modes of thinking. By drawing parallels between both the form and content that exist between the *Athenian Mercury* and *Crusoe*, I illustrate how the early novel becomes a direct outgrowth of the periodical, casting *Robinson Crusoe* as simply an extended practice in resolving cases of conscience. The form and content of the novel is also shown to not only lend itself to a discussion of the influences that dictate reality, but also to a consideration of casuistry's influence behind the production and subsequent popularity of the novel as a genre.

Chapter Two

The Rise and Fall of Dunton's *Mercury*: Casuistic Culture's Athenian Itch

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“For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.” — Acts 17:21,

KJV

“There's nothing the Nature of Man is More desirous of, than Knowledg; he pursues it to a Fault, and will fly even to Hell it Self to advance it.”

— John Dunton

The late seventeenth century saw an explosion in the popularity of casuistry as both a formal practice for resolving problematic moral dilemmas and as a general mindset of enlightenment. It became a practice that represented the progressive mind, the searcher for truth. From the midst of this pervasive casuistic culture arose the publisher/writer John Dunton and what became the century's most enduring periodical — the *Athenian Gazette or Casuistical Mercury* (later known as simply the *Athenian Mercury*). In his preface to the first volume of the *Mercury*, Dunton accounted for some of the primary sources of inspiration that led to the development of what came to be known as the Athenian Society — an elite group of intellectuals that provided the material for the *Mercury*, taking it upon themselves to answer questions on any subject posed to them by the lay public. Dunton stated, “We sometimes read (without being ashamed to own it) the Great Aristotle, the Ingenious Descartes, the Incomparable Mr. Boyle, the Transactions of the Royal Society, with those of the Foreign Virtuoso's.” This statement concerning the diverse assortment of sources that underpinned Dunton's core philosophies served as a type of introductory note to the twenty

volumes and five hundred eighty numbers of his periodical that followed. It also indicated a degree of sensitivity on the part of Dunton and his colleagues concerning the nuances that characterized the rationale of late seventeenth-century England, specifically with regard to empiricism and casuistry.

As previously discussed, the prevailing mindset of the time was one that began to equate skepticism with personal enlightenment. It was a way of thinking that prized a personal, experimental, or otherwise experience-based knowledge over the traditional philosophic approach that emphasized an automatic deference to what was considered the definitive word of prominent intellectual forefathers — usually Aristotle. It was an era of poignant epistemological change that insisted on the need for representation from various social and cultural fronts before asserting anything as factual. Dunton's *Athenian Mercury*, which took the form of a weekly question-answer, half-sheet folio, reflects his awareness of this emerging epistemology. While some may have resisted this epistemological transformation that favored empirical and casuistic values, Dunton devoted his question-answer publication to resolving the central issues attendant to this shift. His timing could not have been better. The *Mercury* was an immediate success and Dunton was forced to employ the help of others as well as increase the periodical's circulation in order to keep up with demand. Elements of social inclusion and the overtly casuistic content in the *Mercury* explain in large part its original staying power. With an ever-widening readership that had begun to see casuistic justification as the stuff of daily life, Dunton offered his periodical as a medium through which the public could collectively witness (and contribute to) the production of knowledge and the resolution of various cases of conscience. While the particulars of this experience-based epistemology may have contributed to the formal properties of the

Mercury, they also exposed problems with basing knowledge on first-hand experience — problems that Dunton ultimately failed to eradicate.

I. Social Inclusivity

Similar to Robert Boyle’s practice of Meletetics, the High Casuistry of seventeenth-century England likewise emphasized the ability and capacity of any individual to resolve complex ethical dilemmas through considering the socially constructed hierarchy of the principles of moral law. This hierarchy was one that depended upon a consensus from various social fronts rather than the singular teaching of any particular authority figure from the past. Casuistic resolutions were only considered valid if the principles upon which they were based were publicly viewed as ostensibly noble or transcendently important. Dunton’s *Mercury* was a publication that recognized this principle and strove to represent any and all facets of society. The first edition of the *Athenian Gazette or Casuistical Mercury* appeared on March 17, 1691, containing an eclectic array of questions tendered by the public. Anyone was permitted to submit their inquiries “by a Penny Post Letter to Mr. Smith at his Coffee-house in Stocks-Market in the Poultry” (I.1). The emergence of a pervasive casuistic culture and the intellectual activities that such a practice encouraged had successfully created an epistemological space in which this periodical could flourish. The diversity of the questions first addressed in volume one speaks to an unrestrained curiosity that had taken hold of a public liberated from restricted questioning of universal axioms. The questions presented ranged from “Whether the Soul is Eternal, or preexistent from the Creation, or contemporary with its Embrio?” (I.1.2) to “Where was the Soul of Lazarus for the four days he lay in the Grave?” (I.1.4) and “How came the Spots in the Moon?” (I.1.7). Questions that previously had only perhaps been attended to in intimate settings amidst friends were now laid before a

collective audience to peruse, critique, and even respond to if desired. Dunton described this revolutionary forum as designed to

satisfy all ingenious and curious Enquires into Speculations, Divine, Moral, and Natural, &c. and to remove those difficulties and Dissatisfactions, that shame or fear of appearing ridiculous by asking Questions, may cause several Persons, to labour under, who now have opportunities of being resolved in any Question without knowing their Informer. (I.1)

By guaranteeing the anonymity of the querists (and the respondents), Dunton hoped to elicit questions that his readers were reluctant to pose to divines, thus allowing “the mute inglorious Duntons of the 1690s to voice their problems and obtain the kind of guidance long afforded to the clergy” (Starr 20-21). In this regard, Dunton’s *Gazette* became a harbinger of similar future projects such as the *Spectator* that would promulgate a similar philosophy of inclusion amongst its readers only twenty years later. The *Spectator* called on

all manner of Persons, whether Scholars, Citizens, Courtiers, Gentlemen, of the Town or of the Country, and all Beaux, Rakes, Smarts, Prudes, Coquets, Housewives, and all sorts of Wits, whether Male or Female, and however distinguished, [...] High or Low, Rich or Poor. [...] This sort of Intelligence will give a lively Image of the Chain of mutual Dependence of Humane Society, [and] take off impertinent Prejudices. (Brewer 103-104)

Addison and Steele’s extreme sensitivity to the ever-expanding spectrum of their English readership surely can be traced in part back to Dunton’s Athenian project. Aware of the diversity that distinguished his new readership, Dunton tactfully capitalized on questions such as “What sort of Men are the Poorest in the World?” by responding, “Poverty is but a

suggestion of our own fancy; therefore those men are the Poorest, who think they want most, not those that possess least” (I.2). Such responses were doubtless attractive to an emerging middleclass already overly self-conscious about their social distinction. Indeed Dunton won a great deal of initial support for his literary efforts through his wide range of subjects that appealed to all classes of society (Graham 21). The Athenian Society, which consisted of no more than Dunton and his brothers-in-law Richard Sault and Samuel Wesley, had taken it upon themselves to authoritatively answer questions in any language and on any subject (I.7). Their decision to retain the anonymity of their institution ultimately paid off as “the impression seems to have been general that a considerable group composed the ‘Athenian Society’” (Graham 17), not merely a couple of pedants led by an oft-times obfuscating casuist. And with the occasional addition of experts who also preferred to remain anonymous, Dunton wrote in his *Life and Errors* that “we found ourselves to be the Masters of the whole Design” (257), taking all knowledge to be their province (Graham 17). Such was the aura that Dunton sought, and it seems to have worked, for the queries were submitted at a dizzying rate to Mr. Smith’s coffee house, and the *Athenian Mercury* was born. But its birth would not have been so prominent an event had it not been for the emergence of practices such as casuistry that had begun to teach society the importance and the potential capacity of the individual.

II. Overtly Casuistic

By the end of the seventeenth century, casuistry was no longer a practice of solely Jesuits or clergymen; it had infiltrated the public sphere and was popular enough a practice to warrant a periodical devoted solely to its tenets. The casuistic model of reasoning was a case-based model. Jonsen and Toulmin have define casuistry as

the analysis of moral issues, using procedures of reasoning *based on paradigms and analogies*, leading to the formulation of expert opinions about the existence and stringency of particular moral obligations, framed in terms of *rules or maxims that are general but not universal or invariable*, since they hold good with certainty only in the typical conditions of the agent and circumstances of the action. (257, my italics)

Through systematically comparing any current problem or dilemma to “past or paradigmatic cases that bear on the decision” (Jonsen & Toulmin 15), the casuistic thinker was led to the most viable solution for his or her particular impasse. Since the feasibility of any solution was based primarily upon the particulars of the circumstance, every facet of the situation had to be considered. Ignoring even seemingly insignificant details of a certain moment was to risk arriving at a false resolution since the ignored elements, if considered, may have changed the circumstance altogether. While opponents of casuistry feared that such justification would lead only to a type of rootless relativism, others viewed it as quintessentially enlightened because of its appeal to the transcendent principles of spirit-of-the-law living contrasted with the increasingly unfavorable (and traditional) letter-of-the-law mindset. After such an explanation, it becomes clear why the epistemology of casuistry, which emphasized the divergent nature of experience while simultaneously relying upon it to achieve resolution, instilled an apprehension within the minds of seventeenth-century thinkers concerning the category of knowledge in general. But this didn’t stop them from engaging in casuistic justification concerning nearly every problematic aspect of society.

In many ways, the *Athenian Mercury* marks the pinnacle or heyday of casuistic thought. It provided an inviting and unintimidating medium for addressing the multifarious

queries that had formerly met with insubstantial resolutions derived from obsequious appeals to an outmoded philosophical tradition—one led primarily by Plato and Aristotle. This periodical contained questions that reflected a public ambivalence concerning everything from the role and legitimacy of religion in a new empirically-based epistemology, to skeptical questions designed to probe and verify Dunton's own self-proclaimed credibility. Everything from basic rules of social etiquette to the physical properties of light was called into question in what became a type of grand re-evaluation of philosophical foundations.

The *Mercury* was overtly casuistic in more than its title. In many ways, casuistry served a mitigating function during this time of epistemological upheaval. James Keenan observes that “casuistry is conceived in doubt, born in turmoil, and lives in constant search of resolution” (ix). The prominence of casuistic practices in the seventeenth century, which practices emerged as a medium for justifying the complications attendant to the emergent empiricism, may well constitute one of the greatest modern philosophical transformations that we know of. Examples of this transformation may be seen in some of the more prickly problems that the Athenians were called upon to resolve. Many volumes of the *Mercury* are peppered with questions concerning religious reformation, most of the answers to which followed nicely the casuistic model described above.

The justification of religious tenets became particularly apropos as people struggled to understand what should be done with elusive categories such as faith and hope—categories that finally one had no real or concrete “first-hand” experience with. The pervasive mindset that encouraged society to question nearly everything led to some interesting questions concerning the literal meaning of certain scriptural, or otherwise religious, principles. From the first volume of the *Mercury* the questions began to flow:

“Where was Paradise?” (I.8.1), “Whither went the ten Tribes?” (I.10.2), “Whether it was a real Serpent that was made use of for the tempting of our First Parents?” (I.15.4), “Whether it was a real Apple our Parents did eat in Paradise?” (I.15.6), and “What became of the Waters after Noah’s Flood?” (I.16.5). Questions such as these became an expected norm of nearly every publication of the *Mercury*, and many of the answers took the form of an overt practice in casuistical justification—a practice that had become viewed as the most commonsensical and valid approach to resolving such dilemmas.

A question presented to Dunton and his little society of scholars in volume 14, number 20 was one concerning an acquaintance of the querist that “never valu’d any Religion, as hardly having known any, by reason of [his acquaintance’s] long travels” (4). He continues by stating that as of late the man has “found himself very plyable to entertain one of these three, either that of the Papist, Church of England, Or Presbyterian Religion, and that which makes him in suspense which to chuse, are three Vertues, and three Vices he finds them all to be generally Masters of.” For virtues, the man in question sees the oft-repeated church services of the Papists, the great charity of the Church of England, and the great “seeming purity” of the Presbyterians. Their vices: “The cruelty and uncharitableness of the Papists, the general neglect of Devotion in the Church of England, [...] and lastly, the ill nature and Covetousness he finds among the Presbyterians.” After presenting Dunton and his colleagues with the specifics of the matter, the questioner asks them which of the aforementioned religions, then, be the one which the man should embrace, adding, “he has promised to submit to your Judgments” (XIV.20.4). This last amendment to the question was a common one seen throughout the numerous volumes of the *Mercury*, and it illustrates the

degree of confidence many readers had in resigning themselves comfortably to whatever ruling might be published by the Athenians.

Characteristic of most casuistic resolutions, the answer to this question took the form of an appeal to higher principles in order to determine which of the three churches was the least wanting. The panel of respondents concluded that “if we show him the Vertue of the one exceeds that of the other, and that the Vice of the same Community is also less then what the others are guilty of, it will be a good step towards the fixing him.” They continue,

Upon Examination we shall find it determined in favour of the Church of England, for neither the repetition of the Popish Avemaryes or Pater-nosters, or the devout Looks and Pretensions of the Presbyterians, will avail them any thing without Charity, and their Vices show they want it, nay all their Religion is vain who have it not; but they that possess it are in a more probable way to be fitted for all other Christian Duties; for St. Paul saith, 1 Cor. 13. Those that are without Charity want all things, but those who are charitable possess many Vertues. (XIV.20.4)

In this case, the higher principle appealed to in order to achieve resolution is charity along with the scripture-based assertion of being nothing without it. By alluding to such a principle, the stated vice of the Church of England — that of a “general neglect of devotion” — becomes infinitely more forgivable than the Papists’ cruelty and uncharitableness and the Presbyterians’ ill nature and covetousness, both of which constitute a breach of the greatest of all commands to possess charity. The Papists and Presbyterians, then, become a part of the class of worshippers that Paul declares spiritually wanting, making the decision clear. From this casuistic exercise, the Church of England emerges as the most enlightened and true by

seeming the most inclined to abide by the transcendent spirit of the law, a mindset that marked a progressive lifestyle and seen to be quintessentially renaissance. This approach differed greatly from what people were accustomed to. Before the advent of High Casuistry and so-called “enlightened thought,” such a dilemma as the aforementioned would most likely have been resolved by simply referencing a definitive statement or teaching from *The Penitentials* or a prominent mind of the past without attempting to account for the intricacies of the particular situation. It was generally believed that what applied to one, universally applied to all. But such a cut-and-dried model met with staunch resistance in seventeenth-century England where the constant pressure of empirical and casuistic thought had begun to make considerations of particulars central to any question’s resolution.

While the answer presented by the Athenians to the previous question illustrates nicely their own familiarity with the casuistic model on their part, other questions reflect an acute understanding on the part of the querists. Volume 13 contains a submission to the *Mercury* dated Saturday, February 10, 1694, that takes up three quarters of an entire page in accounting for all of the possible aspects of the specific question. The querist begins, “I Earnestly desire your Friendly Advice and Impartial Judgment on the following case” (XIII.2.1). He goes on to describe that he has recently been offered to be a tutor for the sons of a recently deceased Baronet, and despite his friends’ urging him to accept the assignment he states that “I am not at present inclin’d to it for these Reasons.” What follows is then an extremely detailed account of the circumstance along with his various grounds for ultimately not wanting to accept the position offered him. First, the proposed stipend seems insufficient for the responsibilities he is to shoulder. Second, the proposed stipend does not seem to reflect the great pains he had undertaken to acquire his education. Third, he states, “The

Children are very young, and [...] it appears to me so troublesome to beat the first Rudiments of Learning into Children.” And lastly, the mother and the various “masters” in the house would inevitably choose to be more involved in the children’s education than this man desires, he preferring instead to have full control of curriculum and discipline. “For these Reasons,” he continues, “I am yet in the Mind to refuse the present Offer.” He then presents the various demands that would have to be met in order for him to accept the appointment, each demand containing a detailed justification. He concludes his inquiry like a true casuist by venerating his ultimate desires to instill within his pupils a degree of acumen based on exalted principles of enlightened thought:

I am not greedy of Money, nor do I desire so great a Sallary to gratifie my Pride or my Pleasure, but that my Thoughts may be more at leisure, and *the more exalted to inspire my Pupils* with such Sentiments as my make them *good Christians and True Gentlemen*. [...] I have fairly stated my Case to you.” (XIII.13.2, my italics)

The Athenians’ inclusion of this question in its entirety may seem perplexing at first, as their common practice was to paraphrase and shorten most submissions. But their surprisingly short answer to this man’s intricate dilemma says much concerning the casuistic model that had become so revered: “We [...] desire the liberty of Printing the whole Letter, which is so *exact a Pattern* for a Tutor’s Accomplishments, and Methods, and Ends of Teaching, that we doubt not but that it will very much oblige the World,” adding, “It appears to us that you are much more capable of advising your self [than we are].” The questioner’s exactness in accounting for the particulars of his circumstance is then applauded and the only thing that the Athenians’ see that may have gone unconsidered is “the Common Providence

of God, who tho' he makes us Offers of things, [...] yet has his own Ends and Designs in it," implying that regardless of the situation's unattractive package it may be where God wants him to be for other reasons. After stating so, Dunton and his educated clan leave the man to what they considered his better judgment—a judgment made “better” by its accurate reflection of the casuistic model of reasoning.

III. The Particulars that Drove the Form

While seventeenth-century casuistry overtly dictated a large portion of the *Mercury*'s content, less obvious but equally important is how the particulars of a casuistic epistemology drove the *Mercury*'s form, and, by extension, that of periodical literature in general. Dunton's numerous adamant assertions pertaining to the credibility of the Athenian Society might have helped establish his periodical's reliability, but the formal conventions of the *Mercury* most likely played an equally significant role. Its eclectic and somewhat anomalous question-answer format, for example, was viewed as the required form of casuistic practice. Casuistry didn't allow one the liberty of being selective of which daily questions and occurrences were or were not relevant. Things had to be dealt with as they arose out of the stuff of daily life. The Athenians' awareness of this principle is reflected in their decision to include such a hodgepodge of questions in nearly every number of their periodical. The Q&A convention of the *Mercury* both reflected and captured the form considered accurate to real life, and it explains in part why people may have viewed it as so credible.

In addition to its Q&A format, the periodicity of the *Mercury* must have played an equally important role in maintaining support for the periodical. Here was a publication that was consistently fed to an eager public every Tuesday and Saturday in the same form and format for nearly seven years. Its form and regularity became conventions that served

purposes similar to the same conventions that Poovey has witnessed in the seventeenth-century practice of double-entry bookkeeping: “Rigid conventions [...] functioned like the locked door of the study, in that these conventions rendered the recorded information inviolable” (35). In double-entry bookkeeping, any specific transaction could be verified by an appeal to additional ledgers that contained proof of the same transaction. Through the very process of repetition and reiteration, the veracity of a transaction was established. A similar thing might be said of the *Mercury*, and more generally periodical literature. The questions addressed in the *Mercury* were always timely and attempted to draw from the various experiences and intellects of a highly educated (albeit somewhat fictional) society of erudites. Certain questions were returned to time and time again from year to year, citing further evidence to justify previous answers and claims. Doing so provided an ever-expanding sense of authority and believability for the *Mercury* and its producers. Consistently returning to certain questions provided readers with an ever-increasing cache of intellectual justification and showed the Athenians to be extremely aware of and sensitive to the necessity of considering every angle of a particular moral dilemma.

An example of this may be seen in Dunton’s dealing with questions concerning infant baptism (a popular topic of religious reformation). Dunton saw the need for an occasional unsolicited publication that took the form of an apology of difficult questions that had been answered in prior volumes concerning this particular topic, as though his returning to them with even more alacrity would in and of itself placate any doubts concerning the legitimacy of his previous answers. In November of 1691, Dunton decided to devote the entire fourteenth number of volume 4 to the resolution of queries submitted concerning this very subject. The inquiries vary from “What think ye of those that dye in Infancy Unbaptized?”

(6), “Why was not Christ Baptized before he was Thirty Years old?” (4), to “Why Sprinkling and not Dipping?” (5). Question two reads, “What certain indubitable Grounds can we have for the Practice of Infant Baptism?” followed by “Whether Infant Baptism is to be found in Scripture?” (IV.14.3), both being answered in the affirmative. Yet despite such a thorough initial treatment of the issue, Dunton decided only four numbers later to designate the entire piece to legitimizing number fourteen of the same volume, entitling it “A Vindication of Mercury n. 14 Vol. 4 about Infant Baptism” with a lengthy “Postscript about Infant Baptism.” If volume 4, number 14, then, constituted Dunton’s primary assertion on the topic of infant baptism, number 18 along with its detailed postscript may well be viewed as the legitimization and the re-legitimization of the same.

Similar to double-entry bookkeeping, the periodicity itself of the periodical satisfied the public’s desire for consistency and dependability—consistency being the primary factor in the systematic production of probable knowledge. The unwavering consistency of Dunton’s publication paralleled the type of systematic validation that was occurring daily in the laboratories of entities such as the Royal Society. Dunton’s rooting many of his assertions in first-hand experience must have gone a long way in mollifying his audience into comfortably embracing his periodical. The consistent form and distribution of the periodical may also have significantly contributed to the weakening of that epistemological skepticism associated with Cicero. While the trends of the time were making quantification a more and more acceptable form of knowledge production (Poovey 138), the *Mercury*’s regular twice-weekly circulation and its “rigid conventions” may be seen to have carried with it a type of quantification, or systematic production of authenticity. While the practice of casuistry was one that insisted upon accounting for every detail relating to the circumstances of any

decision, the legitimization of its assertions could be found in the accumulation of similar moments that became a type of evidential chain.

The preoccupation with this repetitive process that I've previously labeled as one of assertion, legitimization, and re-legitimization, may well constitute a type of endless evidential chain, harkening back to Aristotle's epistemic regress argument, in the which he queried, "Is it possible to start from that which is not itself attributable to anything else but is the subject of attributes, and ascend into infinity?" (47). This question prefaces Aristotle's attempt to debunk the school of thought that insisted upon the demonstration of certain knowledge, for such a demonstration of something's legitimacy, he asserted, must necessarily constitute an "infinite regress" of which our finite minds are incapable of performing: "If behind the prior stands no primary, we could not know the posterior through the prior [...] for one cannot traverse an infinite series" (16). In syllogistic terms, if variable A is dependent upon variable B to establish A's legitimacy, and if variable B in a similar way is indebted to variable C, it becomes an endless evidential chain where each variable is completely dependent upon both the former and the latter to establish its reliability, ad infinitum (Aristotle 48). Yet this very approach to the construction of knowledge that Aristotle dismissed as impossible in its infinity was the very model embraced, consciously or unconsciously, by seventeenth-century thinkers—and specifically by Dunton. With each passing year would come a greater regard for the *Mercury*, which regard may or may not have been an accurate indication of the content's actual reflection of reality. Similar to the previous power models that the Renaissance desired to break away from, the increasing ethos of the *Mercury* based heavily upon its casuistic content and periodic form seems to have influenced its early reception and created an intimidating aura of authority, making it easier

for Dunton's and his colleagues' resolutions of life's intricacies seem more valid than perhaps they were.

IV. Problematic Elements of the Mercury

Despite the best efforts of Dunton's Athenian Society, the fact remained that many of their proposed resolutions or proofs were simply attempts to prove the improvable. The answers to the aforementioned questions were anything but unassailable. Stating, for instance, that "Children are capable of Proselytism, as may be observ'd from our Saviour's words, when he said, Suffer little Children to come unto me," may make one wonder whether Dunton's "Children" in this answer is the same as the "Infants" stated in the question. But the answer goes on to cite examples of infants under the age of one year that have been witnessed to have "grasp'd its Hands together, lift 'em up, look'd up it self, and with an Air of all the satisfaction that was possible for an ancient person, dy'd; another that smil'd dying" (IV.14.2). The author's reliance in this answer upon personal, first-hand experience for justification illustrates the common casuistic model of the time that valued such a dependency and approach as verifiable (even though the supposed "empirical" evidence presented here is really a conjecture, for who really knows what a one-year old child is experiencing?).

But in answering the question concerning whether or not there was sufficient scriptural basis for the baptism of infants, Dunton may have complicated the issue more than he helped it as he ultimately failed to provide any type of definitive or otherwise empirical evidence for his answer. He stated that the proof of his conjecture was to be found

Not expressly in the Letter, but from necessary and unavoidable
Consequences, as we have already shewn; which is enough to all Dis-

interested Persons: To such as are prejudic'd, we wou'd put this question, [...]
 Suppose the Quakers shou'd ask us, Whether God made the World out of Pre-
 existent Matter, or no? Whether Jesus Christ was the Second Person in the
 Trinity? Whether our Saviour was born of the Virgin Mary? How can we
 Maintain the Godhead of Christ? Nay, almost, How we can Prove any of the
 Articles of our Christian Faith? We shou'd be at a loss to do it verbatim.

(IV.14.3)

While Dunton seemed keen to much of what his intended audience was craving, the above answer exposes a problem in the Athenians' governing epistemology of experience. How can one, after all, experientially "prove" articles of faith? As if it wasn't difficult enough to maintain an ascendancy for assertions pertaining to things spiritual by drawing from first-hand experience, the Athenians discovered that their supply of first-hand knowledge soon dried up, leaving them dependent upon logical conjecture as the foundation for many of their published answers. But, as predicted by Aristotle, such a mode inevitably suffered from the problems of infinite regress as each assertion was perpetually dependent upon a never-ending flow of validation. The growing prominence of empiricism and what McKeon calls a "countercritique of extreme skepticism" (21) required more and more sensible and empirically believable answers—the very type of answers that Dunton and his colleagues found difficult to produce on a regular basis.

It soon became apparent that not everyone shared Dunton's optimistic sentiment of being "a master of the whole design." Judging by the questions regularly submitted to the *Mercury*, it seems clear that many people were somewhat apprehensive about the prominent "voice of understanding" affected by the *Mercury*'s producers. Again, the way in which

Dunton dealt with certain topics pertaining to orthodox religion and the alterations, if any, that the new empirical philosophy implied sometimes proved to be problematic. Spiritual perplexities brought about by religious reformation gave rise to such questions as “What Idea a Man can have in his mind of the Spiritual World, which he never Saw?” (I.3), “Whether there be any local Heaven or Hell, and whether the Fire of the latter be metaphorical or real?” (I.9), and finally “Whether Miracles are ceas’d” altogether? (I.4). Despite the Athenians’ protestations concerning “a faith in the harmony of science and religion,” and in spite of Dunton’s allegedly measuring each assertion “by [its] confirmation of divine truth” (McEwen 137), questions such as these appeared as a type of exploration into the unknown waters of epistemological reformation, as attempts to delineate the limits and conditions of new understanding. While the *Casuistical Mercury* served an indispensable role in attempting to resolve such resolutions, and while many answers to questions drew heavily (and safely) from the generally accepted authority of the Bible and Aristotle, some answers simply exacerbated the issues at hand rather than offer any type of viable resolution.

In the very first issue circulated of the *Gazette*, the question was posed, “How came the Spots on the Moon?” While it seems that this inquiry would lend itself well to a solid, empirical answer based on telescopic observations, Dunton simply avoided answering it altogether. Instead, he merely dismissed the superstitious notion of the angel Gabriel having bumped into the moon with his wing while avoiding an errant comet, basing his dismissal on the fact that that would imply some type of irregularity or imperfection on the part of an angelic being. This rather unexpected and silly response was directly followed by an observation that offered no real sense of closure at all: “We affirm, that in its creation it was made an opaque and dark Body illuminable by the Sun, as more proper for the Regiment of

the Night, a time of Repose and Cessation from labour” (I.1.7). Surprisingly, Dunton leaves it at that and doesn’t offer any eccentric conjecture concerning a possible origin for the spots on the moon. The question simply goes unanswered without recognition of the fact.

It is telling that many questions like the preceding would go unanswered by Dunton and his partners while other inquiries that lent themselves to outright speculation were granted the utmost attention. In a later number of the first volume, someone relates, “I knew a Gentlewoman who wept the first Night She slept with her Husband. Whether was it Joy, Fear, or Modesty that caus’d these tears?” (16.3). The fact that there was no ostensible premise upon which to base an answer to such a hypothetical scenario didn’t stop Dunton from launching into an elaborate answer devoid of everything but a rather ill attempt at humor:

We shall rather attribute it to a fearful Modesty, than Joy, or any other Cause. [...] Mandesto in his Travels [...] says a Young Gentlewoman of Japan being on her knees at the end of a Table, waiting on her Master [...] and over-reaching her self to take a Flaggon that stood a little too far from her, she chanced to break Wind backwards, with which she was so much ashamed, that putting her Garment over her head, she would by no means shew her Face, but with an enraged Violence taking one of the Nipples of her Breasts into her mouth she bit it off; with the Anguish of which and the shame she underwent, she immediately dyed in the place.

He goes on to say that this bizarre and rather distasteful instance begs our pity, while the circumstance mentioned in the question concerning the newlywed wife weeping in bed deserves “our Admiration, and wishes, that there were more instances of this sort, and less of

the Impudent and shameless behavior of the contrary” (I.16.3). The answer offered to an earlier question concerning the sort of creatures that inhabit the moon would have been at least as fitting in this situation: “We have not so much as one footstep of either Experience or reason to guide us therein, and *we don’t pretend to revelation*” (I.7.1, my emphasis). But despite averring the latter, Dunton and his colleagues did “pretend to revelation” on one too many occasions.

Questions such as “Whether Moses had a real or visionary sight of Canaan from Mount Pisgah, since the distance is accounted at least One hundred Miles?” (IV.2.3) and “Whether it is a Sin for a Surgeon to Cure the Venereal Disease?” (IV.23.9) were answered as if there existed some empirical justification for them, when in reality there was none. Other questions that led Dunton and his fellows on to pedantic conjecture included “Whether when a Horse Neighs, is it a rejoicing, or because he is angry” (IV.2.13) and “Whether do Bells on the Harness of a Horse cheer the Horse, since ‘tis suppos’d that Beasts cannot distinguish of Harmony or Musical sound?” (IV.9.9). While the latter question’s answer included at least an appeal to some first-hand experience with those who made their living with “Dancing-Horses,” the former question’s answer that put forth as its basis “We [the Athenians] believe” surely did the *Mercury* no favors in reflecting a balanced integration of logical speculation with empirical fact. A far cry from the hard and fast, concrete answers that the public was accustomed to reading in the Royal Society’s publications, the Athenians began to be viewed by many as either unable or unwilling to engage in any type of empirical or scientific discourse. Dunton’s choosing to omit these elements served only to exploit his periodical as an insufficient consideration of what casuistry required—a complete and thorough deliberation of every facet of a given circumstance. The *Mercury*’s growing

reputation of being simply a collection of enlightened conjectures with little to no empirical factuality must have left a rather disconcerting taste in the mouths of some.

By the 1690s, the Royal Society had become a recognized entity of knowledge production. Along with its foundational tenets that emphasized the minutest of observations as potentially productive, a similar need developed in casuistic thought to value first-hand experience and observations even more, or to integrate logical speculation with empirical fact. The preface to the first volume of the *Mercury* stated that the Athenian Society was up to speed with the happenings of the Royal Society, yet some people took it upon themselves to test this assertion. In volume 4, number 14, the question appears, “What are the Royal Society now doing, and what have they done for these several Years left passed?” (1). Rather than engaging in scientific discourse by referring to specific advancements in learning brought about by the Royal Society, Dunton substitutes an encomium on the life of Robert Boyle, the Athenian Society’s patron saint:

Some of [the Royal Society’s] Worthy Members now and then give us a Specimen both of what they have been, and what yet may be expected from them, there being in the last Weeks Thursday Gazet an account of two Books publish’d by two persons, who were the great Ornaments of that Society, The Ingenious Mr. E. and the Honourable Mr. Boyle, whom all the World admire, [...] who is an Academy himself, and who alone, were there not another left, is an Atlas strong enough to support the Reputation of Philosophy in our English World. (IV.17.1)

But such a professed adherence and deference to the scientific society of which Boyle was a part was not sufficient in and of itself to convince everyone that the Athenian Society was as savvy as they suggested.

Indeed question 1 in the second number of volume 6 seems to reflect a tone of surprise when a reader of the *Mercury* asked, “We wonder that since your Society obliges the World with all sorts of Learning, and since you have Poets amongst you, that you have not made an Elegy upon Mr. Boyle?” No doubt sensing growing reservations about the reliability of the Athenians, Dunton appropriately followed this query with “An Elegy On the Death of the Honourable Robert Boyle, Esq; Fellow of the Royal Society” (VI.2.1) that celebrated the life of Boyle in the lines, “Those God-like Works in which his Life he spent, / To us and Future Ages lent, / Are his Eternal Monument,” (lines 53-55) and

Let’s see if from afar
Glitt’ring beneath our Northern Pole
We can descry some new unwonted Star,
For that must be his Soul. (lines 145-48)

Dunton’s reference and reverence to Robert Boyle was an attempt to indicate that the Athenians were not behind the intellectual trends that surrounded their periodical, and that they fully intended to take into account the miscellany of perspectives and voices that the casuistic model required on any given topic. In professing to be oriented to the “Transactions of the Royal Society,” Dunton implied to his readers that the criteria which categorized authentic, condonable understanding in the empirical world would be similarly reflected in answering the casuistic dilemmas presented to him and his anonymous society. But his substitution of discourse *about* prominent scientific figures for the required discourse of

empirical considerations undoubtedly perpetuated uncertainties concerning the Athenians' capacity to consider everything required by the casuistic model in order to reach probable resolutions.

In addition to the Athenians' failed attempts to affect an empirical tone for their periodical was their tendency to discriminate against certain types of questions. While the *Mercury* was observably representative of a variety of backgrounds both educational and cultural, readers of the new periodical had good reason to be suspicious of just how representative and inclusive the periodical truly was. Beginning with the title page of the first volume, Dunton resolved to satisfy "all the most nice and curious questions proposed by the Ingenious." The patronizing use of the word *ingenious* could potentially be seen as a bit threatening to, say, a novice reader. But more explicit perhaps was Dunton and his counterparts' openly reserving the right to exercise "a Judgment of Discretion in answering only Such Questions as *we* think shall deserve it" (I.1, my emphasis), simultaneously expressing a dislike of questions from "Little-wou'd-be-wits, and pretenders to Philosophy and Reason" (I.1). Although Dunton attempted to qualify such assertions by ensuring his readers that such a "Judgment of Discretion" would only be exercised against "atheistic questions" that "tend to the destruction both of Divinity and Morality," the fact remained that each submission would have to be funneled through a group of self-proclaimed erudites who would make the ultimate decision concerning the question's resolution and legitimacy (and it has yet to be shown exactly how many questions were actually submitted by the public or simply fabricated by Dunton himself).

What seemed to be an attempt to appropriate the traditional power model, the Athenian Society appeared to simply co-opt the place of the philosophical greats that had

previously been appealed to on all topics for resolution. It is understandable, then, why the general public would be initially hesitant to question such an enigmatic entity as the Athenian Society, erroneously assuming it to be an amalgamation of the brightest minds of their time. But such a paradoxical relationship between what the *Athenian Gazette* proclaimed and the actual process of production that it underwent obviously concerned some. Even though Dunton exerted much time and effort in quelling the skeptical doubts that continually appeared in the stream of daily submissions to his paper, he never did achieve the unequivocal ethos that he desired for his name and works. His approach to resolving the most complex cases of conscience reflected an inchoate understanding of the emerging epistemology of his time. Whether it was due to the overly conjectural tone of his answers, or the dismissive manner in which he sidestepped the more difficult issues (or a more likely combination of them both), Dunton's words would never attain the prestige of a Bacon or Boyle. His selectiveness in answering only the questions that *he* ultimately considered to be the most relevant must have frustrated more than a few submitters.

V. Reader Retaliation

While Dunton yearned to become the "spiritual advisor" that many practitioners of casuistry longed for (Starr 18), his attempts to prove the improvable and his replacement of empirical factuality with mere conjecture, combined with his tendency to discriminate against certain types of questions, provoked some of the *Mercury's* audience to begin retaliating and to methodically probe the intellectual integrity of the mysterious society behind the *Mercury*. Appropriately, this probing came in the form of submitted questions of a very empirical nature. Some were elaborate, mathematical word problems undoubtedly designed to survey the respondent's skills in quantitative reasoning (I.4.6, I.5.5, I.14.11,

I.26.6). These questions clearly irked Dunton and his colleagues as their answers reflected. One submitter asked, “Why gave you not an Algebraic Canon for this Question?” He then revived a previous query: “Having weighed a Body in one Liquor to find the weight of the same Body in another Liquor, the absolute Gravity of the Body, and the Specific Gravities of the two Liqueurs being given?” (VI.15.6). After offering a very brief answer to the question without a lengthy or detailed explication, Dunton responds, “Now to give a long tedious Algebraic Canon for this, is to go from Westminster to the Royal Exchange by the short cut of Islington.” But despite such open animosity, these types of questions continued to arrive.

Some prying questions were presented in Latin and subsequently answered solely in Latin, as if to conciliate any concerns pertaining to the Athenian Society’s adeptness in language acquisition and classical education (I.4.12, I.6.4, IV.19.3, VI.16.10). From linguistics (I.6.2, I.10.1, I.16.13, IV.4.2) to the established laws of motion (I.7.5, I.12.7) and basic history (I.8.6, I.16.9, I.24.3, XIV.28.3), Dunton’s elite little society impressively held their own, offering answers that were not only intriguing but that showed them to be respectably up to date with most of the newest tidbits of information in circulation concerning a dizzying array of topics. Yet their patience with such blatantly challenging queries was short. For instance, after convincingly explicating the answer to an intricate mathematical problem through an extensive diagramming of the solution, Dunton condescendingly amended,

I know not what the Proponents of this and some other Questions of like nature sent to us, can pretend to themselves; ‘tis not to satisfy the World, or the generality of those to whose hands this will come, nor the Proponents

themselves, who I question not but can as easily resolve them as we:

Wherefore we think fit for the future to desire the World to forbear imposing School-boy Tasks upon us, or such other Mathematical Questions, as are not worth our time, being more laborious than difficult to answer. (I.12.9)

In the preface to the second volume, Dunton appeals further for “no more Riddles or Equivocations, &c. for they are of no use to the Publick.” But despite such insistent requests, overtly equivocal questions continued to arrive at Smith’s coffeehouse. Some were openly challenging, such as one which stated, “Gentlemen, I have read in one of your Mercuries your opinion, that there is a world in the Moon, and nothing in the writings of Moses speaks against it, you say; methinks there seems there to be an argument against it.” After publishing the man’s argument, Dunton’s published reply is

truth may speak something that is different from the truth, but not repugnant to it. [...] We are not really perswaded there are more worlds (we mean habitable ones) than ours, we only say ‘tis probable and we have very good reason for it, which it wou’d be too long to mention at present. (XIII.15.1)

While the successful resolution of these contesting queries served to enhance the mystique that surrounded the increasingly mysterious Athenian Society, failure to offer satisfactory declarations severely detracted from the indisputable standing that Dunton so desired for his periodical. In McEwen’s *Oracle of the Coffee House* he observes that “what we see today as a lack of discrimination appears in the *Mercury* in an occasional acceptance of conclusions based upon insufficient or dubious observation, and in their giving monsters and maggots equal importance” (116). From Dunton’s matter-of-fact tone in his accounting for the human features of mermen and mermaids (I.11.2) to his simple failure to accurately elucidate the

anatomical differences that made men's voices deeper than women's (I.17.6), the *Mercury's* existence was a precarious one that depended on its overtly casuistic orientation, periodic form, and occasional moments of genius to outweigh its more enervating and numerous moments of conjectural disaster. J. Paul Hunter notes that

[John Dunton] was dependent on a fickle public for whom the latest novelty became quickly outdated, a public who (paradoxically) retained a residual respect for the world and times that they had lost and felt only passing attachment to the fads and trends they patronized and practiced. (100)

Yet despite such volatile epistemological conditions under which Dunton was forced to operate his periodical, the *Mercury* remained a popular and prominent publication until nearly 1697, which made it the longest running periodical of its time.

VI. Conclusion

The longevity of the *Athenian Mercury* may be explained in part as a result of the things that Dunton *did* get right in his attempts to cater to a rapidly changing culture which was becoming more and more based upon the enlightened principles of empirical and casuistic practices, and simply harder to satisfy. Dunton himself stated in *Life and Errors* that “unless a Man can either *think or perform something out of the old beaten Road*, he'll find nothing but what his Forefathers have found before him” (247, my italics). This underpinning philosophy of his Athenian project put Dunton on the road to success, but remaining on that road proved to be harder than even he may have imagined. While the *Mercury* fulfilled a growing public need to feel included in the production of knowledge and “up-to-date, aware of the latest facts, and current in the intellectual, cultural, and social trends of the moment” (Hunter 103), the Athenian Society gave its audience no real sense of overall direction or

confidence in their proposed solutions. The *Athenian Mercury* may have “popularized knowledge and made it accessible to the mass of readers without the poring over of dusty books” (Graham 20), but its characteristic “curiosity mongering” became a hindrance to the appreciation of scientific method (McEwen 127) and the similarly evolving expectations of casuistic justification. The examples in Dunton’s literary brainchild are skimpy that illustrate well thought out answers based upon the validating power of a detailed consideration of first-hand experience and repeated experimentation, and therein lies the element of endurance that the *Athenian Mercury* lacked—failing ultimately to consistently and convincingly combine enlightened conjecture with empirical fact.

Despite the initial flattering encomia written for the Athenian Society by prominent literaries such as Jonathan Swift and Charles Gildon, once word got out concerning the actual composition of the Society’s members, the *Mercury* quickly plunged into the pool of dismissed literary productions exploited as fraudulent (McEwen 116). Swift’s early accolade of Dunton included in Gildon’s *History* turned into a ridiculing parody in *A Tale of a Tub* of Dunton as the publisher of editions of bogus gallows confessions (McEwen 124). Notwithstanding Dunton’s preliminary claims that his periodical would be sensitive to the prerogatives of the new epistemology reflected in the practice of casuistry and the transactions of the Royal Society, what the public finally saw in the *Mercury* was a group of unabashed pedants out to make a buck hoping that their gentlemanly air alone would grant them the ethos to survive. While the *Mercury*’s role in popularizing knowledge should not be overlooked nor discredited, the fact remains that by foolhardily promulgating basic conjecture as fact, the Athenian Society imposed many falsehoods upon the incipient readership of its time, making a public eager to participate in knowledge production feel

duped rather than represented, and intellectually stymied rather than enlightened. That was enough to keep John Dunton struggling to make a living in the periphery of literary production until the day that he died.

Chapter Three

The Early Novel as Periodical Literature: Detail, Casuistry, and Form in *Crusoe*

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"If ever the story of any private man's adventures in the world were worth making publick, and were acceptable when published, the editor of this account thinks this will be so. [...]

The editor believes the thing to be a just history of fact; neither is there any appearance of fiction in it."

— Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*

I. Introduction

Writing during the late nineteenth century, William James complained at having to “forge every sentence in the teeth of stubborn and irreducible facts” (qtd. in Whitehead 54). But such was the expectation of the epistemology which had begun to emerge over two centuries earlier, captured poignantly in the writings of John Dunton’s *Athenian Mercury*. The “irreducible fact” was an epistemological unit that was becoming more and more characterized by a heavy reliance on first-hand experience and a consideration of all the particulars of an occurrence. These considerations would first be seen in the practice of early seventeenth-century casuistic philosophy in England and then perpetuated and modified through the emergent empiricism. By the early eighteenth century, the ever-growing number of casuistic thinkers and practitioners constituted a pervasive branch of society that prided themselves in being able to reach sensible solutions to complex moral dilemmas through an enlightened and progressive mode of reasoning. This mode was typified by an unusual attention given to even the minutest details of any given situation. Whether it was a moment of moral crisis or empirical experimentation, considering every single detail of that particular

moment became an intrinsic part of arriving at any type of veritable solution. As seen in the epigram that precedes this chapter, Daniel Defoe apparently considered *Robinson Crusoe* to be an accurate representation of what constituted credibility during a time when the fact as an epistemological unit was undergoing a substantial transformation. This chapter attempts to flush out some of the prominent elements of Defoe's novel that enabled him to put forth his book as "a just history of fact." Through focusing on Defoe's extreme preoccupation with detail and the form in which he chose to cast his novel, along with his overtly casuistic content, Defoe's 1719 production of *Robinson Crusoe* becomes more than simply an extended practice in casuistic justification, or Defoe's own Athenian project of the fictitious life of a single individual; *Crusoe* emerges as a product of a rapidly maturing casuistic-empirical binary and mindset of Defoe's era. A consideration specifically of casuistry's influence in the production of *Crusoe* combined with an analysis of its form also provides a direct link between it and the *Athenian Mercury*, and by extension, between the periodical and the early novel.

II. Understanding Starr's *Defoe and Casuistry*

In George Starr's magnificent discussion on Defoe's ties to the prominent practice of casuistry, he recognizes the *Athenian Mercury* as a potential medium through which casuistic principles made their way into Defoe's writings of the early eighteenth century (9). Indeed Defoe himself was shown to be an occasional guest contributor to the *Mercury*, although he chose to remain anonymous (Starr 12). John Dunton was personally put out by Defoe's *Review*, a periodical so similar to that of Dunton's *Mercury* that Dunton presumptuously wrote in his *Life and Errors*, "It is strange that such a first-rate Author as Daniel De Foe should be so barren of new Projects, that he must interlope with mine" (423-24). But for

Dunton to claim his casuistic project as an intellectual concoction unique only to him was to ignore some of the most prominent cultural or otherwise casuistical strains of his time that led to a number of publications rivaling the *Mercury*, none of which proved to be as popular as Dunton's Athenian project. Similar to the underpinning philosophies of Dunton's *Mercury*, Starr observes that Defoe seemed very aware

that life is infinitely various, that every new situation poses new problems, and that these problems must be dealt with on their own terms. For [Defoe], as for earlier English casuists, cases of conscience [were] not matters of idle speculation, but the very stuff of daily existence. (viii)

It was most likely under such a belief that Defoe composed *Robinson Crusoe*, a book that finally presents a case study of casuistic philosophy's merit. While Starr recognizes the importance of the *Athenian Mercury* as "a source or transmitter of casuistical subject matter," asserting the *Mercury*'s "employment of casuistical methods probably made an even greater contribution to early eighteenth-century literature" (31-32), he only peripherally mentions *Robinson Crusoe*, choosing instead to focus on Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, *Colonel Jack*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Roxana*. In part, then, this discussion can be seen as an augment to Starr's, choosing rather to focus exclusively on Defoe's *Crusoe*.

Starr's argument is an intriguing one. He sets out to account for the reasons why readers of Defoe are so often lured into sympathizing with his protagonists, which in many cases are "patently wicked" (v). Starr cites Defoe's adherence to an explicitly casuistic model of reasoning in an attempt to elicit reader support for certain characters that in any other circumstance might be difficult to like. Similar to Donne's successful endeavor to produce a poignant understanding of and charity for those who have committed suicide (discussed in

Chapter One), Defoe makes his readers super-privy to the details and intricacies of each of his protagonist's situations. As Starr puts it, "Details that appear to be introduced for their psychological, social, or economic import, or for the sake of narrative realism, frequently involve covert appeals for sympathy" (vi). As all casuists knew, someone was far less likely to condemn another when exposed to the frequently disturbing minutiae of that person's personal circumstances. For Starr, then, "conscience and consciousness is at the core of individual identity. [...] Characterization consists of the analysis of conscience. [...] Defoe's heroes and heroines spend a great deal of time weighing their actions, and through this process we come to know and care [...] about them" (ix). By approaching a study of Defoe's writings from a specifically casuistic stance, Starr ultimately attempts to shed a new light on the novels that he discusses by illustrating how Defoe drew heavily from traditional casuistry for his own purposes.

The first chapter of Starr's *Defoe and Casuistry* is indispensable for anyone approaching a study of casuistry and its potential literary repercussions. In it, Starr traces the evolution of casuistry along with the traditional fears and objections that inevitably accompanied it. Besides proving that "there appear to have been as many who admired casuistry as loathed it, as many who practiced it as shunned it" (7), he makes a point to establish a link between Defoe and casuistry by showing basic casuistic texts to have been an intricate part of the various curricula that Defoe would have been exposed to. He then traces potential connections between Defoe's *Review* and Dunton's *Mercury*, ascribing much of the latter's demise to the former's success. It is by focusing exclusively on Defoe's conduct manual *Religious Courtship*, however, that Starr illustrates how Defoe saw casuistry not only as useful but quite necessary in certain circumstances such as the one addressed in the

manual — “whether Protestants are justified in marrying Roman Catholics” (Starr 44). The final answer to the difficult and timely question can be seen in the dialogue between a tearful widow and her sisters (protagonists of the text) when they recognize “the necessity of husbands and wives being of the same opinions in religion with one another” (Starr 44).

Unlike the heroes in Defoe’s conduct manuals, most of the main characters in his novels are left to themselves to sort out the complexities of their circumstances and to hopefully arrive at the most viable and justified solution on their own. It is this particular point that Starr chooses to focus on in his remaining chapters that discuss *A Journal of the Plague of the Year*, *Colonel Jack*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Roxanna*. In the *Journal* (as well as the other novels), Starr observes how Defoe incorporates extreme detail with historical features and vivid narration partly for “forensic purposes” (53), employing “matters of fact to gain acceptance for what are at best matters of belief” (54). Such an air of believability is necessary for all of Defoe’s protagonists if he is to accomplish the particular goal of each of his novels —the goal of the *Journal* being identified as “to persuade readers to adopt a certain attitude in face of a new plague, and towards life’s dangers and perplexities in general” (Starr 54). In many ways, Starr continues, Defoe sees the series of events unique to the histories of each of his heroes and heroines not merely as events brought to life, but “as a series of questions to be answered” (56). Such questions not only provide structural units for the greater part of Defoe’s novels, but they add to each an “intensely purposeful spirit” (57). What we see time and time again in Defoe’s writings are general assertions of ways to confront experience rather than specific recommendations for potential courses of action. Starr sees the literary productions of Defoe more as elucidations of certain frames of mind “which can be brought to bear on perplexities of all kinds” (80) and not as overly-specific

models for dealing with explicit moments of conflict. Therefore, *Colonel Jack*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Roxanna* each address a type of

“unquenchable thirst,” whether for gentility, money, or sheer experience [which] prevents each hero and heroine from acquiescing in his Providentially ordained lot, and drives him to commit actions which — criminal or sinful as they may be — are nevertheless compelling as displays of determination, energy, and resourcefulness. (Starr 93)

Moll Flanders becomes Defoe’s most obvious example of this paradox. The reader is encouraged from the outset of the book to abhor Moll’s crimes but not to despise the criminal, being asked to “distinguish between what Moll does and what she essentially is” (Starr 112) — a tragic victim of a shattered life fraught with unusually hard circumstances. Starr maintains, “Without minimizing her culpability, the narrative seeks to deflect our severity from the doer to the deed, and to retain sympathy for the erring heroine. [...] With this object, considerable emphasis is put on the [casuistic] principle that circumstances alter cases” (112). Citing a similar remark that Defoe asserted in *The Compleat English Tradesman*, Starr quotes, “Few things in nature are simply unlawful and dishonest, but [...] all crime is made so by the addition and concurrence of circumstances” (112-13). Hence Moll becomes “characterized less by what she does than by an array of motives and pressures that contribute to her seduction” (Starr 116). Such is Defoe’s common casuistic approach to the lives of all of his protagonists. Through being made privy to what in some cases is disturbing detail of the lives of the main characters in Defoe’s novels, the readers of Defoe are both tacitly and overtly encouraged to embrace what he saw as an enlightened casuistic model of reasoning. Through such adept characterizations of his protagonists, Defoe

ultimately demonstrates through his fictitious novels the casuistic principle “that truth is seldom pure and never simple” (Starr 190) and that “truthfulness is not automatic, dovelike innocence but involves an exercise of judgment” (211). In this way, Starr convincingly puts forth that Defoe’s fiction was in large part a byproduct of his casuistic orientation.

III. Defoe’s Validation Through Detail in *Robinson Crusoe*

With such decisive and conclusive sentiments on the part of Starr concerning Defoe and casuistry, it seems strange that he would not have augmented his study with a more detailed look at these same principles in *Robinson Crusoe*, which I see as lending itself at least equally well as the aforementioned novels to a discussion of casuistic strains extant in Defoe’s works. Central to Defoe’s assertion concerning *Robinson Crusoe*’s factual feel is his thorough attention to detail. If Dunton’s *Athenian Mercury* is reflective of a late seventeenth century that was preoccupied with hedging assertions within an immense array of validating details, and if, as Starr observes, Defoe’s other novels exhibit the same, then *Robinson Crusoe* is likewise emblematic of this phenomenon. Recent criticism concerning the novel as a genre observes that “most novels [...] begin in epistemology; certainly most address epistemological issues in ways that suggest urgent engagement” (Hunter 44). It has already been shown that the prominent epistemology of Defoe’s era was one that was indeed preoccupied with accounting for every detail of any given social, scientific, or cultural transaction.

Similar to many of the cases of conscience presented in Dunton’s *Mercury*, the inundation of particulars in *Crusoe* certainly lends itself to an urgent and critical engagement of what is being written. In the record of Robinson’s early travels, for instance, describing his excursions to the coast of Guinea, he relates

how easy it was to purchase upon the coast, for trifles, such as beads, toys, knives, scissars, hatchets, bits of glass, and the like, not only gold dust, Guinea grains, elephants teeth, &c., but negroes, for the service of the Brasils, in great numbers. (59)

If the inclusion of such thorough description represents a primary assertion on the part of the author in establishing the authenticity of his record, then the pages that follow this passage certainly serve to legitimize, and re-legitimize that assertion. While chronicling his seaward adventures, he describes one of the ships on which he sailed as “120 tun burthen,” carrying “6 guns and 14 men, besides the master, his boy, and my self” (61). He recollects the course that the ship took with rigorous exactitude: “We set sail [...] for the African coast, when [we] came about 10 or 12 degrees of northern latitude. [...] We had very good weather, only excessive hot [...] till we came the height of Cape St. Augustino” (61). This attention to somewhat diminutive specifics only continues to increase within the same account as Robinson describes crossing the equator in twelve days time, marking their last observation as being “7 degrees 22 min. northern latitude,” and shortly thereafter as “about 11 degrees north latitude, but [...] 2 degrees of longitude difference west from Cape St. Augustino” (61). Amidst this methodical and painstaking recitation of exact navigational features and coordinates, he includes the names of at least seven more well-known venues by which they passed—the isle Fernand de Augustino, Brasil, the river Amozones, the river Oronoque, the Carribee-Islands, Barbadoes, and the Gulf of Mexico (61-2). The inclusion of such meticulous minutiae is not necessarily interesting for the reader of *Crusoe*. On the contrary, after two pages of such protracted description, it can begin to feel a bit tedious.

More extreme examples of this same differentia are seen during Robinson's fateful shipwreck upon the shore of what would become his habitation for the next 28 years. The detail in this particular account is such that from the time he and his eleven crewmates were capsized in their smaller secondary boat until Crusoe's landing on the shore little if any information seems to have been left out. Such an exhaustive depiction paints an exquisite picture in the minds of the reader and undoubtedly goes a long way in establishing the novel's believability as the event itself seems to unfold in real-time. Finding himself, for example, being tossed toward the shore of the deserted island in the midst of unforgiving waves, the narrator relates,

The wave that came upon me again, buried me at once 20 or 30 foot deep in its own body; and I could feel my self carried with a mighty force and swiftness towards the shore a very great way; but I held my breath, and assisted my self to swim still forward with all my might. I was ready to burst with holding my breath, when, as I felt my self rising up, so to my immediate relief, I found my head and hands shoot out above the surface of the water; and tho' it was not two seconds of time that I could keep my self so, yet it relived me greatly, gave me breath and new courage. I was covered again with water a good while, but not so long but I held it out; and finding the water had spent it self, and began to return, I strook forward against the return of the waves, and felt ground again with my feet. (64-65)

This detailed description is but one in a series of three or four composing a total of two complete pages of Robinson being tossed amidst the sea before being "rather dashed [...]"

against a piece of rock” and deposited on the shore of his new island-home (65), bringing the documentation of his shipwreck to a total of five pages.

After being granted access to the various features of his building a raft, the reader is presented with nine more pages of precise narrative concerning Robinson’s sequestering of all the salvageable effects that remained in the broken vessel. Here Defoe was sure to thoroughly account for all the supplies that Crusoe would draw from in order to survive for the next portion of his life:

I first got three of the seamen’s chests, [...] the first of these I filled with provisions, viz. bread, rice, three Dutch cheeses, five pieces of dry’d goat’s flesh, [...] some barley and wheat. [...] As for liquors, I found several cases of bottles belonging to our skipper, [...] and in all about five or six gallons of rack. [...] There were two very good fowling-pieces in the great cabin, and two pistols [...] with some powder-horns, and a small bag of shot, and two old rusty swords. (69)

This meticulous inventory continues for another six or seven pages, accounting for everything from saws, axes, and hammers to “a great hogshead of bread [...] and a box of sugar, and a barrel of fine flower” (69-75). In some ways, Crusoe’s character mirrors an experimenter in a Royal Society laboratory, keeping detailed accounts of all his equipment used and the conditions that surrounded his experimentations. Put together, the two events of Crusoe’s shipwreck and subsequent retrieval of various and sundry provisions comprise a total of fifteen arduous pages, leaving some readers itching to gloss over or speed-read the pages’ contents.

With such inklings on the part of the audience, why would Defoe have included such soporific narration at the risk of losing his patrons' interest? The answer may simply be that as a savvy and informed writer, Defoe would have been quite aware of the points of attraction toward which his eighteenth-century readership gravitated; and what a modern reader deems dull was most likely not the case in Defoe's era. He was writing for a public whose immersion in a pervasive casuistic-empirical culture and whose readings of casuistic tracts (such as Dunton's *Mercury* and Defoe's own *Review*) and Royal Society publications had accustomed them to expect the ins and outs of any given experience (whether it be scientific or moral) to be accounted for before moving on to the more important task of finding meaning or gleaning knowledge from that same experience. A writer's aim was to appear as comprehensive as possible in their considerations so as to make the readers feel secure in proceeding. Readers' interest was piqued by fantastical events made to seem real through the recitation of both exact and familiar knowledge — a knowledge that was legitimated through specificity and detail. McKeon points out that within the novel,

a great and tireless argument of a supernatural reality is maintained within a succession of narrative frames and articulated there by a complex pattern of circumstantial and authenticating details — names, places, dates, events, eye- and earwitnesses, attentiveness to stylistic “sincerity,” confirmations of good character, denials of special bias — all of which subserve the crucial claim to a natural existence; that is, to historicity. (*Origins*, 85)

Historicity, in this sense, is correlative to objectivity — an objectivity that aids in legitimizing *Robinson Crusoe* as a believable and “just history of fact.” McKeon further explains that “to claim historicity for one's story is not only to assert the evidence of the

human senses but also to disavow the pride of human fabrication” (122), which is exactly what Defoe does at the beginning of *Crusoe*. In this way, “the claim to historicity [...] [is] a direct and immediate reflection of empirical and skeptical epistemology” (McKeon, *Origins*, 53), as claims to historicity differ from those of romance by their inclusion of verifiable evidence and by the absence of fabricated or embellished narration. Thus Defoe’s “doctrine of literary realism [...] arises from the ruins of [his] claim to historicity” (McKeon, *Origins*, 120).

The plausibility that permeates *Crusoe* is effected in great measure by Defoe’s adept incorporation of seemingly verifiable facts and details. Hunter points out that this engrossment with what seems to be trivial peculiarities flags a prominent feature of the novel as a genre, stating, “things that cannot happen in our world do not happen in novels” (33). But McKeon notes that shortly after the publication of *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe had to defend his assertion concerning the historicity of his novel as it had come under attack and been branded “a romance and a lie” (*Origins*, 120). In justifying his false claim to historicity, Defoe is quoted in his *Serious Reflections* (1720) as having observed how easy it is “to relate real Stories with innumerable Omissions and Additions: I mean, Stories which have a real Existence in Fact, but which by the barbarous Ways of relating, become as romantick and false, as if they had no real Original.” He concludes that *Crusoe* “is a quite different Case, and is always Distinguisht from this other Jestings with Truth. [...] It is design’d and effectually turn’d for instructive and upright Ends, and has its Moral justly apply’d” (McKeon, *Origins*, 120-21). Hence, McKeon accuses Defoe of falling back onto a casuistic defense (similar to Pascal’s monk) that his false claim was justified as long as the moral end of his novel’s overall message outweighed the means used to accomplish it. In attempting to

equate his novel's "being to a greater or lesser degree history-like" with legitimate, unfabricated historicity, "the crucial pedagogical distinction between true history and romance has evaporated before our very eyes, and the claim to historicity, whether 'true' or 'false,' stands revealed [...] as one of very limited purpose" (McKeon, *Origins*, 121-22). Yet despite these rather uncomplimentary observations concerning Defoe's claims to historicity, the fact is that even today first-time readers of the book are hard-pressed to find traces of fiction within *Robinson Crusoe* because it is so accurate a reflection of what we imagine would literally happen. Indeed, even McKeon seems to concede that "the historicity of [Defoe's] characters [is] quietly preserved within the circumstantiality both of their lives and of the way in which their lives are presented to us" (*Origins*, 122). Surely Defoe's proficient inclusion of elaborate detail went a long way to establish this believability.

Directly related to this establishment of believability through intense detail is Defoe's preoccupation with his protagonist's engagement of the recording of time. From his birth date to his liberation from solitude, the narrator of the story accounts for every span and stage of his life — many times down to the hour of the day. Previous to the shipwreck episode and upon arriving in the "Bay de Todos los Santos" in Brazil, Robinson informs the reader that he had been on the water for twenty-two days (55). Although a mere blanket statement such as "just under a month" or "some three weeks" would have perhaps accomplished the same purpose, the book is pervaded by an apprehension surrounding time and detail and the chronicling of events. This same apprehension can be seen in the elaborate accounts of the Royal Society's experimentations and in the moral histories presented in the *Penitentials* (referred to in Chapter One). In *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe is sure to include the exact date of the ominous voyage that would find him marooned in isolation — "the first of September,

1659” (60). And after “ten or twelve” days upon the island, he blanchingly considered the detrimental repercussions of losing track of time — failing to differentiate between the Sabbath and working days being foremost among his concerns (81). In order to avoid any future confusion concerning his chronology, he marked the exact day by

[cutting] it with my knife upon a large post, in capital letters, and making it into a great cross I set it up on the shore where I first landed, viz. “I came on shore here on the 30th of Sept. 1659.” Upon the sides of this square post I cut every day a notch with my knife, and every seventh notch was as long again as the rest, and every first day of the month as long again as that long one, and thus I kept my kalander, or weekly, monthly, and yearly reckoning of time.

(81)

The notching of the post not being inerrant enough a system of reckoning, Robinson also begins to keep a faithful journal in which he accounts for each of his days and the activities in which he was engaged while maintaining his subsistence. This second time-keeping project serves nicely in verifying the precision of the first. His entry, for example, dated November 4, is notably punctilious with regard to his daily regimen. In it he states, “I began to order my times of work, of going out with my gun, time of sleep, and time of diversion” (88). He continues by recounting how he would “walk out with [his] gun for two or three hours if it did not rain,” and then employed himself in improving his fortification “till about eleven a-clock” (88). From the hours of 12pm until 2pm he avers that he would sleep due to “the weather being excessive hot, and then in the evening would work again” (88-9).

Through his prodigious efforts in tracking time and accounting for his use of it, Crusoe eventually developed an elaborate calendar of the seasons that contained information

concerning everything from what type of weather one may anticipate to the position of the sun in its daily passage through the sky, along with its orientation to the equinox (119-20). Despite such dedicated application, at one point in the narrative Robinson expresses his surprise (and chagrin) for having “[lost] a day out of my reckoning in the days of the week, as it appeared some years after I had done,” affirming that “I lost a day in my accompt, and never knew which way” (109). Although losing only one day in a record, which spans some thirty-five years from the time he left his home, seems meritorious enough in its own right, the speaker shares this observation with a tone of ambivalence and disappointment — as though it undercut, however slightly, the actuality of his annals.

The parenthetical placement and somewhat timorous tone of this observation concerning the loss of a day might be explained through a consideration of reader expectations in the early-eighteenth century. It was a readership that was becoming “progressively more difficult to surprise and impress,” needing to feel “‘in,’ up-to-date, aware of the latest facts, and current in the intellectual, cultural, and social trends of the moment” (Hunter 103). Some of the critics contemporary to Defoe attacked the public’s “mentality that prized gossip, scandal, up-to-the-minute awareness, and the desire to be thought the first to know”; and while strategies of writing-to-the-moment were dismissed by many as self-indulgent, the readership of the time pushed such styles to prominence (Hunter 107-8). This might explain in part the growing fetish of the time to inundate readers with endless sequential details surrounding any given event. Even the slightest chronological break or omission of the nitty-gritty could be potentially weakening in its effects on the text’s allure and believability. And yet Defoe decided to include this chronological glitch in his

work of fiction, suggesting that having lost a day in a thirty-five year record speaks louder to the work's formal realism (and ultimate believability) than if it were never to have occurred.

Although Robinson Crusoe's amazing adventures seem highly improbable — from his escaping a seafarer's death to the incogitable sequence of events that led to his miraculous deliverance 28 years later — the fact remains that there are no supernatural events, per se, in *Crusoe*, and “such things [can] in fact happen against great personal odds, and novels dare to feature a limited number of them in worlds that are essentially familiar, rational, and realistic” (Hunter 33). The philosophical and literary elements exhibited in the casuistic-empirical stance taken in *Crusoe* would have been both familiar and realistic to eighteenth-century readers. Any question of the account's authenticity — from the geographic locus of its wonderful events to explanations concerning the protagonist's rather comfortable survival on a deserted island — can be quelled by an appeal to the hundreds of pages of judicious narration in Robinson's fastidious dossier. If *Robinson Crusoe* had not contained such an acute attention to both familiar and credible detail, chances are that it would not have become so popular among eighteenth-century and subsequent readers habituated to the casuistic model of justifying knowledge through a process of systematic validation. The book went rapidly through six immediate editions followed literally by hundreds in various languages.

IV. The Role of the Journal Form in Establishing Believability

Closely related to the role that detail played in Defoe's novels, and similar to the periodical and the inherent ethos that attended its regular and periodic form, is Defoe's decision to cast his novel in a journal form consisting of entries and protracted descriptions of his curious history. Indeed, a large portion of his novel is constituted by dated entries of

various occurrences. In an article, Ulrich Suerbaum recognizes what he calls a “deficiency” in *Robinson Crusoe*’s formal structure, noting that the book is devoid of chapters or other conventional units of composition: “It goes on and on relentlessly, from year to year, from event to event, from event to reflection or retrospect and back again” (69). But despite this acknowledged deficiency in the novel’s structure, Suerbaum recognizes that the merit of *Robinson Crusoe* lies in a principle of construction that is less easy to see — repetition. He states that “*re-iteration of elements* is the principal means of structuring in the narrative” (71, my emphasis) without addressing the critical role that such reiteration plays in establishing the credibility of the piece. Thus this “lack of structure,” which ultimately serves to verify through reiteration Defoe’s various agendas in *Crusoe*, similarly exhibits the same apprehension toward the exact recording of time and circumstance reflected in double-entry bookkeeping as well as in the publications of Royal Society findings.

In introducing “The Journal” chronicling Robinson’s island stay about a third of the way into the novel, the narrator states, “I began to keep my journal, of which I shall give you a copy (tho’ in it will be told all these particulars over again)” (86). While his initial tone in introducing this section of his record seems to be somewhat apologetic in re-exposing the audience to many facts and circumstances attended to previously, such a tone is most likely disingenuous as this section constitutes a reiteration and legitimization of what had already occurred. It seems likely that such an inclusion in Robinson’s record would not only be attractive to its readers but necessary in order for them to feel comfortable committing to the remainder of the book; for, as McKeon has observed, such an inclusion as a journal could potentially go a long way in establishing the novel’s historicity and factual feel (*Origins*, 316). In a sense, Defoe was signaling to his audience early on that whatever circumstances

may occur and whatever conclusions may be drawn implicitly or explicitly in the process of his narrative would be verified and legitimized through due process of verification through a systematic accumulation of evidence exhibited in his series of daily, monthly, and yearly entries. Akin to the conclusions drawn by the Royal Society concerning the physical world, Robinson's experiments with ethics and morals would be similarly established through complete and objective considerations. While deciding to cast the entire novel from beginning to end as a daily record of journal entries may initially, then, seem to have been the more preferred form in establishing *Robinson Crusoe* as a "just history of fact," Defoe apparently figured that doing so would undercut too drastically the formal realism and subsequent believability of his book. Similar to the chronological glitch referred to earlier, acquiring the ink sufficient to recount the happenings of over twenty-eight years and the paper to write it upon would be difficult for anyone to account for. Crusoe therefore candidly informs the reader that "having no more ink I was forced to leave [my journal] off" (86). But the portion of his journal that he did include is convincing enough in persuading the reader to view the remainder of his story as being based safely upon a plethora of personal experiences interwoven with unbiased, objective observations of a casuistic-empirical sort. In this way, the very form in which Defoe chose to cast *Robinson Crusoe* augments the validity he already achieves through the inclusion of meticulous detail.

Going back to the Humian philosophy pertaining to "probable knowledge" and the habit of our minds, the near-periodic form of *Crusoe* becomes central to its production of knowledge that was so attractive to its readers. Poovey's "stages by which general knowledge was forged from discrete particulars" observed in the practice of double-entry bookkeeping (14, my emphasis) may well be seen in the numerous journal entries provided by

the narrator of *Crusoe* over a period of some thirty years. In this way, the periodicity observed in the form that Defoe chose to cast his novel creates a medium in which these “stages” coalesce and forge meaning based upon observed, constant conjunctions through a succession of similar events. This periodic or regular regimen of casuistic exercises and reasoning on the part of Robinson provides a sturdy basis upon which his assertions can be set forth and subsequently legitimized and re-legitimized, each new assertion hinging upon some revalidating, reiterating detail to emerge in the near future. Poovey observes,

If one had to resist premature generalization, after all, and if one could produce systematic knowledge only by reasoning from the phenomena one observed, then it was imperative to know how one moved from the particulars one saw to knowledge that was sufficiently general to explain things one had yet to see. (15)

As it was crucial to record the actual moment that bookkeeping was initiated in relation to a specific financial transaction and then to legitimize and re-legitimize that primary assertion through a systematic, succession of written records, so it became critical for writers of the eighteenth century to follow suit. If their “historic,” real-life narratives were to endure, they likewise had to legitimize their assertions through the very form that they chose to deliver their literary productions. Hunter observes that “in a London hungry for novelties, even the most successful innovations had a short life, for the fickle public devoured its pleasures and swiftly moved on, and the bookstalls always teemed with new temptations” (104). Only the most solid and epistemologically sound literary works would endure. In her same argument, Poovey reiterates the contention that double-entry bookkeeping served not only to justify commerce, “but also to reemphasize belief in an order sanctioned by God. [...] [It reiterates]

in its very form the symmetry and proportion with which God invested the world” (38). The necessity of a record’s having to reflect this recognized, almost deific order of systematic reiteration in achieving a binding credibility shows itself in Defoe’s novel, and it apparently was enough. His system of reiteration brought about in large part through the form that he deemed most appropriate to direct his novel ultimately served to bolster the book’s veracity and ensure its longevity.

V. Extended and Dramatized Cases of Conscience

In addition to containing meticulous detail, *Robinson Crusoe* parallels casuistical productions such as the *Athenian Mercury* more explicitly by presenting a large number of cases of conscience, or moments of casuistic justification, where the protagonist is forced to transcend the rigidly prescriptive moral codes of his upbringing in order to reach acceptable solutions to the complex moments of his unusual life. By adding an explicitly casuistic element to his otherwise intensely empirical narrative, Defoe augments his account and makes it more reflective and representative of the interests and values of his readers. While we as a reader may sense that he sometimes fails in his attempts to reach moral justification (such as his deciding that the right thing to do was defy parental counsel in order to indulge in his seemingly natural inclinations to roam), these moments in *Crusoe* parallel closely the more extended (and rare) questions of conscience in Dunton’s *Mercury* where the entirety of a single number might have been devoted to answering one question. But where Dunton may have failed in maintaining such a level of judicious scrutiny, Defoe succeeds by designating an entire novel (some 300 pages) to a consideration of the events and circumstances of a single life, making *Robinson Crusoe* both attractive and believable. Such a detailed account of the myriad of influences attendant to the production of acceptable knowledge made the

novel as a genre a perfect forum for further developing an emerging eighteenth-century, casuistic-empirical epistemology.

Defoe introduces conflicts of conscience early in *Crusoe*. Indeed the entire novel can be traced back to a moment of moral dilemma for the young Robinson Crusoe who is torn between his god-directed duty to oblige his parents' desires for him to remain at home and his seemingly god-given inclinations to explore the world and its wonders abroad. Not long after deciding to pursue the latter, Crusoe attests to having accomplished "as complete a victory over conscience as any young fellow that resolved not to be troubled with it could desire" (33). But such a station of moral middling would not last, for his subsequent adventures would provide him with ample opportunities to resuscitate his conscience into a vibrant force from the "pitch of hardness" to which it had attained.

Perhaps no aspect of the book lends itself better to an analysis of its overtly casuistic orientation than Robinson's dealings with the savages that he encountered, one of which became his partner whom he named Friday. When we read of Robinson Crusoe's first observation of the natives, his initial reaction to them was one of detestation, which is captured poignantly in the appellations that he assigned them — "dreadful creatures," "savage wretches," and "hellish wretches" (172-73). But this preliminary moment of disgust on the part of Robinson proves to be only the beginning of what turns out to be an extended and dramatized case of conscience that spans nearly fifty pages, finally documenting an immense transformation in his perceptions as a result of his thorough and unrelenting consideration of nearly all aspects of his current plight. Having now encountered a potential threat to his sequestered and isolated lifestyle, Crusoe's first reaction was to "think of nothing but how I might destroy some of these monsters" (175). Having witnessed their

cannibalism from a distance, he considered their offense to be the most detestable of all crimes and felt it no sin to plan an ambush against the natives upon their return to the island, stating, “I made no doubt but that if there was twenty I should kill them all. [...] My mind was thus filled with thoughts of revenge, and of a bloody putting twenty or thirty of them to the sword” (175-76). But such a rash mindset was short-lived. Within a few days of having ruminated over his concocted plan of mischief, Crusoe began to methodically probe his determination like a true casuist —considering all of the potential repercussions of such an act.

His thoughts first were directed to a consideration of the natives’ god-given disposition to act according to what they knew to be correct. Their orientation to the world was undoubtedly “suffered by Providence” and had developed as a result of “some ages” of customs and traditions of which the savages had been a part (177). Realizing that divine judgment was based not only on action but on the light of reason and understanding, Robinson began to rethink his “fruitless excursion” as unjust, counting the savages as unaccountable before God for their actions due to their lack of a more enlightened Christian outlook:

I began with cooler and calmer thoughts to consider what it was I was going to engage in; what authority or call I had, to pretend to be judge and executioner upon these men as criminals, whom Heaven had thought fit for so many ages to suffer unpunished, [...] how far these people were offenders against me, and what right I had to engage in the quarrel of that blood which they shed promiscuously one upon another. [...] They do not know it to be an

offence, and then commit it in defiance of divine justice, as we do in almost all the sins we commit. (177)

Following due consideration of the matter, Crusoe concludes that “I was certainly in the wrong in it, that these people were not murtherers in the sense that I had before condemned them” (178). He then goes on to account for all of the intermediate reasons and justifications as to why such was the most plausible of solutions, as though anticipating an expectation of such a detailed validation. In using words and phrases such as *but*, *on the other hand*, *in the next place*, *yet*, and *tho’*, Defoe’s protagonist reflects the language of the casuist characterized by his avoidance of dogmatism and his commitment to an ever-widening consideration of the probable implications of a particular conclusion. This language also reflects eighteenth-century apprehensions concerning the production of knowledge, allowing conclusive assertions only after due process of casuistic and empirical reflection and deliberation (or experimentation), understanding that such conclusions are tentative at best as they could change with an alteration of circumstances. Referring to the abhorrence of the Spaniards’ barbarities inflicted upon the natives of America, and considering it his official “duty” to take a life only when his own was threatened, Robinson ultimately decides “to leave [the savages] to the justice of God, who is the governour of nations, [...] that I might not lay my hands upon them, unless I had a more clear call from Heaven to do it, in defence of my own life” (179). As a true byproduct of a culture entrenched in the casuistic and empirical, Crusoe adeptly lays aside his more biased and reactive inclinations, displacing them finally through an appeal to a higher moral and intellectual code that transcends the visceral reactions of a base human nature. But again, such a determination would quickly

change. For not long after Robinson had decided to ignore the foreigners and their insidious acts did the circumstances change when they landed their boats on *his* side of the island.

Inasmuch as casuistry rests on the axiom that circumstances alter cases and resolutions, the natives' landing on the island so close to Crusoe's abode was an event that constituted a change in circumstance pertinent enough to merit a reconsideration of his previous conclusions. Secreting himself in a thicket and witnessing again the savages' conduct in consuming the bodies of their defeated comrades in arms, Crusoe observes having been "so filled with indignation at the sight, that I began now to premeditate the destruction of the next that I saw there, let them be who or how many soever" (189). But through a similar process of contemplation concerning the potential fallout of such measures, he follows a cogent line of rational reasoning that leads him to the disturbing conclusion of his potentially being led away into a series of similar murders "*ad infinitum*, till I should be at length no less a murderer as they were in being man-eaters; and perhaps much more so" (189). He therefore, once again through adept casuistical reflections, avoids committing an act that may be deemed morally reprehensible.

As though he were deliberately and methodically putting his protagonist to the test, Defoe continued to play with this particular issue of Crusoe's dealings with the natives. The series of events and the process of reasoning exhibited by Crusoe in his meeting with and taking in of Friday provide the reader with similar casuistic justifications and conclusions but with a different outcome. Having put it into his mind to acquire a savage to be his companion and guide, Robinson decided on attempting to rescue one of the cannibals' would-be sacrifices, but not without first vigorously debating the issue in his own mind:

These thoughts [...] were attended with this difficulty, that it was impossible to effect this, without attacking a whole caravan of them, and killing them all; and this was not only a very desperate attempt, and might miscarry; but on the other hand, I had greatly scrupled the lawfulness of it to me; and my heart trembled at the thoughts of shedding so much blood, tho' it was for my deliverance. [...] But tho' I had other reasons to offer now, viz. that those men were enemies to my life, and would devour me, if they could; that it was self-preservation in the highest degree, [...] I say, tho' these things argued for it, yet the thoughts of shedding humane blood [...] were very terrible to me.

(203)

Despite his moral aversion for shedding the blood of these men, Robinson states, "However, at last, after many secret disputes with my self, and after great perplexities about it, [...] I resolved, if possible, to get one of those savages into my hands, cost what it would" (203). Upon chasing the man that was pursuing the fleeing Friday, Crusoe is brought face to face with Friday's antagonist, and seeing that he was fitting his bow and arrow to shoot him, "I was then necessitated to shoot at him first, which I did, and killed him at the first shoot" (206). Where the circumstances of Robinson's previous encounters with the natives had never "necessitated" his having to kill any of them, Defoe is careful to point out that this circumstance was indeed different, and through similarly basing his actions on the highest of principles (in this case saving both his life and Friday's), Crusoe is able to take a man's life in a manner that most readers would consider acceptable. It is important to note that the degree of acceptability attendant to this moment in the novel is directly tied to Defoe's

casuistic approach in resolving what is ultimately one of the most prickly cases of conscience — that of taking a life.

A similar moment is seen later when Crusoe storms the beach with Friday, who by now was his dedicated sidekick, in order to save the “poor Christians” that the cannibals had taken captive, recording with exactness the results of their attack: “3 killed at our first shot from the tree. 2 killed at the next shot. 2 killed by Friday in the boat. 2 killed by ditto, of those at first wounded. 1 killed by ditto, in the wood. 3 killed by the Spaniard. 4 killed, being found dropped here and there of their wounds, or killed by Friday in his chase of them. 4 escaped in the boat, whereof one wounded if not dead. 21 in all.” (237). Again, where such murderous frenzies were seen as morally reprehensible when based solely on Robinson’s wanting to preserve the utopian-like conditions of his island home, here these same inclinations are viewed by most as not only justified but honorable because they are based on saving the lives of otherwise defenseless souls.

With the accumulation of new evidences came a change in the moral outcome. The prescriptive moral models set forth in casuistic tracts such as the *Penitentials* had now evolved for Crusoe into fluctuating codes that were based on new findings or realizations with every experience being potentially different. It is in this moment that we see reflected the most prominent elements of both casuistic and empirical philosophy. Robinson Crusoe becomes the objective scientist deeply contemplating the conditions of his experimentation, accumulating evidence through days and months of study; but Robinson’s experiments were in morals and ethics, his island and circumstances being his laboratory. It is through such an appeal to these seemingly noble, commonsensical, and enlightened principles that the otherwise prescriptive nature of divine law — thou shalt not kill — may be preempted.

Therefore, despite Robinson's claim of being "ill enough qualified for a casuist, or a solver of difficulties" (220), he emerges as quite qualified and recognizably adept at such practices. These considerations and concessions in Defoe's novel are quintessentially casuistic and empirical, leaving little doubt concerning the central role that the culture from which Defoe emerged played in powering the production of the piece. It also proffers viable reasons why his book would have been so attractive to a very like-minded, eighteenth-century audience. In this way, the eventual demise of Dunton's *Athenian Mercury* contrasted with the unprecedented success of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* can be explained in large part by Dunton's failing to grasp the big picture (or second element of the casuistic-empirical binary) and Defoe's poignantly capturing and relaying an understanding of that same dichotomy. Both writers made a conscious effort to ensure their works reflected the elements of realism and historicity in an attempt to distinguish them from the recognized fabricated world of romance, but only Defoe's literary production was viewed as having finally succeeded in that endeavor.

VI. Conclusion

During an era marked by its encouragement to read only that which was "practical and devout" (Hunter 121), Daniel Defoe supplied the readership of his time with a book that satisfied these prerequisites and dared to be challenged, having captured so accurately the prime elements of the accepted epistemology of his time. The practicality of his book was substantially achieved through providing his readers with all of the essentials required to produce acceptable forms of knowledge based largely on an acute attention to detail and numerous moments of effective casuistic equivocation. The moments of excessive detail and finicky narration constitute in many ways some of the attractive empirical elements in

Defoe's novel, while the occurrences of moral mitigation reflect nicely Defoe's orientation to the casuistic culture of his time. These two elements of the casuistic-empirical binary addressed throughout this discussion can be viewed separately throughout *Crusoe*, but the more telling moments are those where both the casuistic and the empirical are conflated, such as Robinson's dealings with the natives. Those moments of conflation speak to the perspicacity of Defoe with regard to reader expectations, but those moments also signaled to the reader that the conclusions drawn by Defoe's hero were anything but hasty or rash.

Through combining these two elements with the reiterative journal form of *Crusoe*, Defoe was able to attract and maintain an audience for his literary production that far outlasted that of Dunton's *Mercury*. If John Dunton through his unguarded conjecture failed to satisfy his readers' growing attraction to practicality, failing ultimately to strike that balance within the binary that I have called enlightened conjecture and empirical fact (casuistic-empirical), Defoe succeeded by building his novel upon an intimidating ethos of tenable and inundating casuistic-empirical particulars that served time and time again to both justify and relegitimize the conclusions and conduct of Robinson. Rather than an unconnected series of individual queries, *Robinson Crusoe* becomes not merely an extended narrative but a comprehensive and extended single issue of the *Athenian Mercury*, offering in greater proportion a consideration of all the telling circumstances necessary to unraveling a set of related cases of conscience. The result is a literary production that has withstood the test of time as first-time readers of the book unfamiliar with its history struggle to determine whether it is the fabricated account of a talented writer or, as Defoe initially asserted, a "just history of fact."

The capricious and erratic tastes of the rapidly expanding eighteenth-century readership were difficult to identify and even harder to satiate. Yet during a time when the

shelf life of any given literary publication was uncertain, *Robinson Crusoe* dawned as a quintessential archetype of success. Drawing from the philosophy of Hegel and Taine, Defoe's literary production might well be viewed as a transcript of eighteenth-century manners — a representation of the mind of an age (Vanderwolk 1). In an era of significant scientific advancements and growing credence for sure-tested knowledge, the fictitious Robinson's prolonged stay on a secluded island provided the laboratory conditions in which Defoe was able to achieve a precarious coexistence of subjectivity and historicity (McKeon 402, *Naturalization*), making his record both entertaining and publicly condonable. The rapid and prominent institutionalization of science and casuistry undoubtedly affected the attendant qualities of literature that was undergoing a simultaneous institutionalization. In this way, Robinson Crusoe "stands as a remarkable instance of a work that [...] gives expression to attitudes that seem to lie far from [its] conscious intention" (Damrosch 374), skeptical attitudes subdued by the book's attention to the most prominent elements of the epistemology unique to its particular era.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

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By mapping prominent philosophical or other cultural elements in the literature of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England, I don't pretend to be involved in a trailblazing practice. However, by focusing on casuistry as a publicly recognized and practiced philosophy (influenced highly by the growing prominence of empirical sentiments and practices), I hope to provide a new platform from which one might fruitfully investigate the various ramifications of culture on the literature of the time. After the mid to late 1700s, casuistry would fall out of favor and become less of an overt practice and more of an intrinsic one due to its being stigmatized as merely excuse-making for immoral or unethical behavior.

The literature of mid-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England is replete with recorded public dialogues, pamphlets, books, and sermons on casuistic philosophy and its role in shaping the values and morals of the time. While the overall merit of this project may lie more in the questions that it raises than in the answers it provides, it nonetheless is intended to accomplish a few key contributions to current studies in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century English literature.

Most serious studies of casuistry's role in shaping early English literature and culture occurred in the 1970s with the likes of George Starr and Dwight Cathcart. More recent evaluations of casuistry and its potential place in modern society tend to gravitate toward areas such as bioethics. Indeed, much of Jonsen and Toulmin's discussion in *The Abuse of Casuistry* was spurred by modern implementations (sometimes successful, sometimes not) of casuistic philosophy in resolving particularly problematic ethical dilemmas in the field of medicine. Recently there have been new, though minor, attempts to reinsert the study of

casuistic philosophy back into considerations of the literary development of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England. In a recent article, Urmi Bhowmik argues that “casuistry, as represented in the pages of the *Mercury*, tended not towards moral discipline but towards an understanding of the basis of the social order and one’s place within it” (358). Bhowmik continues by observing, “The *Mercury* did not attempt to resolve the proposed question, but *described the process* that should be followed in procuring its resolution” (359, my emphasis). The majority of her study focuses on the cultural contexts under which the *Mercury* was produced, attempting to show how “the resituating of knowledge within the context of public discourse transacted through the medium of print illuminates seventeenth-century readers’ self-understanding as social beings and political agents” (363). By the end of her article, Bhowmik recognizes the need for “analyses of the production of knowledge” within the contexts she has outlined. Her article emerges as a call to reconsider casuistry as a potential key element to much of our historic studies of English literature. This thesis stands as an answer to such invitations by attempting to identify and explicate the process of knowledge production as influenced by the casuistic-empirical binary unique to seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England.

To ignore casuistry or dismiss it as too culturally peripheral to seriously consider is to glaze over an epistemological strategy and practice that seem to have been far more widely condoned and employed than previously considered, especially between the years 1650 and the early 1700s. Many of our conversations dealing with the cultural nuances that may have shaped the literature of the aforementioned era revolve around the rise of empirical thought and entities such as the Royal Society. But an additional consideration of casuistry’s development as it related to empiricism generates a more accurate epistemological platform

from which to investigate the literary and cultural connections of the time. By adding this casuistic element to an otherwise strictly empirical outlook, we are able to formulate a more comprehensive consideration of the most prominent philosophies and mindsets of late seventeenth-century England. Such considerations also provide a more representative cross-section of the ideas that reigned supreme during the same era.

With the above in mind, this project is intended to augment George Starr's discussion on casuistry and its role in shaping the writings of Daniel Defoe. As noted in Chapter Three, Starr devotes much time to analyzing casuistic connections in a number of Defoe novels but only peripherally engages *Robinson Crusoe*. On its most basic level, this thesis inserts *Crusoe* as equally relevant to considerations of casuistic influences on the production of Defoe's novels, grouping *Robinson Crusoe* with *Moll Flanders*, *Colonel Jack*, *Roxanna*, and *Journal of the Plague*. But on a deeper level, this project augments Starr's premise by adding the element of a dynamic relation between casuistry and empiricism and its potential effects on the evolution of prose fiction. Through mapping the parallel development of empirical thought and its probable influences on the construction of High Casuistic thought, I show that Starr's assertions take on more meaning and his project as a whole becomes richer, adding more critical angles from which to study Defoe.

This expansion of the critical lens offers a more comprehensive view of the milieu of Defoe's era by including previously excluded considerations that may have notably contributed to knowledge production during the same time period. Focusing on the binary of empiricism and casuistry also offers alternative explanations to conclusions drawn by modern critics. For instance, where contemporary literary critics such as McKeon may question the discrepancies in *Crusoe's* journal and cast them as serving only to undercut the

veracity of his account, by understanding the shifting reader expectations in relation to an evolving empirical-casuistic binary we may encounter a more satisfactory explanation of the journal (or, at least, its intended purpose). Such an explanation would not necessarily bridge all the gaps created by the obvious oversights of Defoe, but it could prove productive in establishing *why* Defoe may have felt so inclined to include a journal section in the first place.

In his critique of *Robinson Crusoe*, Michael McKeon recognizes the more glaring problems that exist within the novel's journal segment, stating that the incongruities that exist between the journal and the account that precedes it serve only to undermine the factuality of the report (316). Overall, when comparing the journal to the rest of the book's content, McKeon concludes that "the journal violates both the substance and the sequence of the narrative's historicity" (316). While such a conclusion is understandable and germane, to stop there is to ignore an equally relevant aspect of the journal's inclusion. The journal segment of Crusoe's narrative stands as an attempt by Defoe to reiterate and legitimate much of what he claims Crusoe experienced, thus expelling accusations that the novel was a mere romance and establishing it instead as "a just history of fact." While his intended purposes for including the journal seem in large part to have failed, the *why* behind his calculated inclusion of seemingly redundant material is too important to disregard completely. A further study of Defoe's novels — especially those noted by Starr — from a more comprehensive empirical-casuistic bent may similarly yield further insight into the intentions and overall effectiveness of his literary works.

Finally, the relationship between periodical literature and the early novel is not by any means a new assertion on my part. Current studies have already made connections between

the two genres, emphasizing generally how periodical literature galvanized a new middle-class readership that would eventually embrace the soon-to-come novel, resulting in the assertion that the former gave life to the latter. The periodical is said to have also tutored the ever-growing urban population concerning issues of class and gender, providing vital information about the intricate nature of tasks and deportment expected of the emerging bourgeoisie. Other studies have focused on the periodical as an apolitical space in which authors could articulate new systems of values and discuss social issues unique to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England.

While most connections between periodical literature and the novel rely heavily on the above assertions, this project focuses on how the epistemology unique to the advent of empirical science and High Casuistry created a space in which periodical literature could emerge and the early novel could subsequently flourish. By extending a discussion of periodical literature's casuistic-empirical qualities into Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, I attempt to show how the novel became the ideal medium for resolving so-called cases of conscience attendant to the epistemological upheaval of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England. Novels, such as *Crusoe*, allowed their authors to account for the myriad of influences inherent in daily experiences — *Crusoe* (for example) being made to seem real through the "factual" reporting of detail, time, and the intricacies of each situation. The novel as a genre, then, becomes more than just a close relative of the periodical. Both genres seem to have been spurred into prominence by some of the more salient features attendant to the empirical-casuistic philosophy that I've alluded to throughout. I see the novel as becoming finally a type of culminating product of that same empirical-casuistic binary that emphasized the full range of experiences and considerations involved in reaching justified conclusions.

Mapping the more controlling threads of seventeenth-century casuistical and empirical thought in the form and content of periodical literature (and subsequently in the early novel) shows both genres to be somewhat of a singular byproduct of a fundamental epistemological shift that climaxed in seventeenth-century England.

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