

*PART II*

MAN THE MAKER

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## Aristotle's Crusoe

If Aristotle had written the story of Robinson Crusoe, the moral of the tale would have been different.

The story most of us have read celebrates Crusoe's ingenuity in solving the problem of how to live securely and comfortably on the island where he found himself a castaway after a shipwreck. It also celebrates his virtues—his courage and his foresight. It is a story of man's conquest of nature, his mastery and control over it.

For Aristotle, the island would have represented Nature, nature with a capital *N*, nature untouched by humans. The works of nature—the seeding of trees and bushes, the growth of plants, the birth and death of animals, the shifting of sands, the wearing away of rocks, the formation of caves—had been going on long before Crusoe's arrival. Aristotle would have viewed the changes that Crusoe brought about as a way of understanding the changes that had taken place without him. For him, the

story would not have been a story of man *against* nature, but an account of man *working with* nature.

When we try to understand something that is difficult to understand, a good common-sense rule is to start out with something easier to understand in order to see if that helps us overcome the difficulties. What is more understandable may throw some light on what is less understandable. Human beings should be able to understand what goes on when they make something or change something. That is less difficult to understand than what goes on in nature when human beings are not in the picture. Understanding works of art may, therefore, help us to understand the workings of nature.

I suggested, in the preceding chapter, that in its broadest meaning the phrase "work of art" covers everything that is man-made. Let's reconsider that. Is everything produced by human beings artificial, not natural? When parents produce children, are the children artificial? Are they works of art? If you say no, as I think you should, then we have not yet succeeded in correctly drawing the line that divides the artificial from the natural.

Suppose that lightning strikes a tree in a dense forest. The tree is split in half; branches are cut off. The burning of some of them sets off a forest fire. The forest fire and all the other changes that result from the lightning's stroke are all natural, are they not?

But a person, walking through the woods, carelessly throws away a lighted cigarette. It sets the dry leaves of the underbrush on fire, and the woods are consumed in flames. That forest fire was caused by a human being, as the first one was caused by lightning. The first one was a work of nature. Was the second a work of man—something artificial, not natural?

Suppose, however, that the individual in the woods had not

dropped a lighted cigarette. Suppose he had gathered dry twigs and leaves and heaped them in a mound that he surrounded with small stones. Then, lighting a match, he set fire to them in order to cook his lunch. We would ordinarily say, would we not, that he had *built* a fire. Would the fire he built be a work of art, unlike the fire set off by the careless dropping of a lighted cigarette?

Before you answer that question too quickly, remember that fire itself is something natural. It does not need a human being to make it happen. In fact, when man does make it happen, what does he make—the fire itself or does he merely cause it to happen at a certain time and place, as the man walking through the woods caused it to happen at the spot where he decided to cook lunch?

One more example to consider: lightning split the tree and cut off some of its branches. Men can do that, too, with axes and saws; and they do it when they engage in lumbering in order to obtain the wood they need to build houses, or to make chairs and tables. You understand that the houses men build are products of art, not of nature—artificial, not natural. Building a house, then, is not quite the same as building a fire, for you cannot be quite so sure that the fire a man builds is artificial, not natural.

What is the difference between the man-made house—or the man-made chair or table—and the man-made fire? Or between the tree's branches that are cut off by lightning and the tree's branches that are cut down by lumberjacks? Or between the fire built by the picnicker in order to cook his lunch and the fire caused by the man tramping through the woods who carelessly dropped a lighted cigarette?

Let's start with the easiest question first. The fire caused by

the lighted cigarette was accidental rather than intentional. It was not for a purpose that some human being had in mind. It resulted from human carelessness—even mindlessness—rather than from careful planning and foresight. The absence of any human purpose, planning, or foresight puts it on the natural side of the line that divides the natural from the artificial.

It was man-caused but not man-made. It resulted from something that a human being did, but man is a part of nature just as much as lightning is. Not everything that results from human behavior is a human production or a work of art.

Now, what of the man-made fire, deliberately built for the purpose of cooking lunch, and the man-made house, deliberately built for the purpose of providing shelter? Here neither humanly-brought-about result is accidental. Purpose and planning are certainly involved in both. So far, at least, both belong on the artificial side of the line that divides the natural from the artificial. What, then, is the difference between them?

One difference is clear immediately. Fires happen in nature when men are not present, but houses do not. Men can help nature produce fires by lighting matches and setting dry leaves and twigs aflame. But when human beings build houses rather than fires, they are not helping nature produce them. In the one case, we said before, men do not make fire itself, but they make fires happen at a certain time and place. In the other case, men do make houses.

The house that Robinson Crusoe built after he had rescued some tools from the shipwreck was something that he and he alone produced, not something he just made happen at a certain time and place. Except for his being on the island, no houses would have ever happened, as fires might have happened as a result of bolts of lightning.

One more question remains. We have so far decided that

Crusoe's house, planned and produced for a purpose, is a work of art, not of nature, something artificial, not natural. But is it entirely artificial—wholly a human creation? The Bible tells us that before God created the world there was nothing, and that God's creation of the world brought something out of nothing. Did Crusoe bring something out of nothing when he built his house?

Hardly. He built it out of the wood he had obtained from chopping down trees with his ax, cutting off branches with his saw, and smoothing them with his plane. The wood that went into the building of the house came from nature. It was there to begin with. So, too, was the iron out of which nails had been formed, nails that Crusoe recovered along with tools in the carpenter's chest that floated ashore after the shipwreck. The house, made out of wood and nails, was indeed made by Crusoe, not by nature, but it was made out of natural materials. That is also true of all the tools that Crusoe had the good luck to be able to use.

Let's not forget the children that parents produce. We have already decided that children are natural products, not artificial—not works of art. Is that because they are sometimes accidental products rather than intentional ones?

Sometimes, we know, children are the result of carelessness or thoughtlessness, and are as unexpected as they are unplanned for. But even when children are wanted and planned for, even when some thought is involved in begetting them, and even when, with some luck, parents help nature produce children at a certain time and place, they are not like the fire that the picnicker helped nature to produce or the house that Crusoe built out of materials provided by nature.

Why not? For the time being, let us be satisfied with the answer suggested above. Children, like the offspring of other ani-

mals, can certainly happen without any thought, planning, or purpose. That is not true of anything we would call a work of art or artificial. But just as human beings can make fires happen by knowing something about how fires happen in nature, so, too, can human beings make children happen by knowing something about how the procreation of offspring happens in nature.

When they are totally ignorant of that, then their offspring are entirely accidental. But when they have such knowledge, the having of offspring is, partly at least, the result of planning and purpose.

We have surveyed a lot of happenings and productions, and we have compared the differences between them in order to see if we can place each on one or the other side of the line that divides the natural and the artificial. Before we go on, it might be a good idea to summarize what we have learned.

First, we decided that fire itself is something entirely natural. The particular fire a man purposely builds at a certain time and place is an artificial happening—something that would not have happened had not some human being caused it to happen then and there.

Second, the artificiality of the fire the picnicker built in order to make lunch differs from the artificiality of the house that Crusoe built in order to provide himself with shelter. Though both spring from human purposes, houses, unlike fires, never occur in nature when human beings are not at work. Let us refer to the picnicker's fire as an artificial *happening* and to Crusoe's house as an artificial *product*.

Third, Crusoe's house, though an artificial product, is not something wholly artificial. It was made out of natural materials, not out of nothing. It is, therefore, unlike the world itself

that, according to the Bible, God created out of nothing. Let us always call things that men make out of natural materials their *productions* rather than their *creations*.

Fourth, we considered human children and the offspring of other animals. Do we ordinarily call them either productions or creations? No, the language we use for describing their coming to be involves such words as "reproduction" and "procreation."

Let us take that fact as significant. The results of biological reproduction or procreation are not like the fire caused by lightning—a *natural event*; nor like the fire built by man—an *artificial happening*; nor like the house that Crusoe erected—an *artificial product*; nor like the world that God created out of nothing.

However, understanding how men build houses will help us to understand how animals reproduce or procreate offspring. Understanding how men make fires happen will help us to understand how fires happen as natural events. Understanding the difference between making fires happen and building houses will help us to understand the difference between fires happening in nature and animals reproducing their kind.

Do not ask now whether understanding all this will also help us to understand how God created the world. That question must wait until we see whether our understanding of the works of nature and of art leads us back to the Bible's story of creation—a story that Aristotle never read.