

Scrooge and the Lessons of Generosity

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“Marley was dead, to begin with.” That’s the familiar first sentence of Charles Dickens’ classic story, *A Christmas Carol*. It’s a remarkably enduring story: there have been over a dozen film adaptations, and at least twice as many television versions. (One of my favorite film adaptations stars the Muppets, with Michael Cain as Scrooge; I particularly like the Great Gonzo as the narrator). Like the Christmas celebration, Dickens’ story is about many things, but one of the main themes is the importance of generosity in our lives. In the following comments, I will briefly explore the virtue of generosity by looking at Dickens’ story.

In this tale, the main character Scrooge has three ghostly teachers who help him learn the lessons of generosity by looking at the consequences of a life of greed. Generosity is the disposition of people with large and giving spirits. Like all virtues it has related vices. A distorted excess of generosity is the vice of prodigality: lavish, excessive and wasteful giving. Of course, that was not Scrooge’s vice—he was deficient of generosity. He was a miserable miser, an isolated old man. At the beginning of the story, Dickens offers this description of Scrooge, “But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scourge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever stuck out generous fire; secret and self contained, and solitary as an oyster.” How did Scrooge end up this way?

In order to flourish, most of us need vibrant outward lives that include other people, not lives like Scrooge’s that are solitary, “secret and self contained.” Among the qualities, or dispositions, that are needed to sustain rich relationships are justice and generosity¹. We must know how to give others what they are owed, and we must be able to give without expecting something in return. It seems that for most children, their affections, sympathies and inclinations don’t tend toward generosity; instead, they must be trained in this direction. Education is required to develop the disposition of uncalculated giving and graceful receiving². Fortunately, every holiday season is an opportunity for such training, for it is at these times that we learn the satisfaction of generosity, while steering clear of the deficiency of greed and the excess of prodigality.

Sadly, as a boy, Scrooge was denied such opportunities. In fact, he received the opposite education: Scrooge’s father left the boy to spend many Christmases alone at boarding school, while his classmates left to celebrate with their families. Dickens paints the scene: “‘The school is not quite deserted,’ said the Ghost. ‘A solitary child, neglected by his

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 120.

² *Ibid.*, p. 121.

friends, is left there still.” At a formative time in his life, Scrooge was left out of the annual practice of uncalculated giving and graceful receiving. As a consequence, he turned inward, and over the years his disposition hardened, like an oyster’s shell, into a solitary miser.

However, by the end of the night’s lessons Scrooge is miraculously transformed. He is freed from the chains of greed and self-centeredness. This is what Scrooge learns from the Ghost of his deceased business partner, Jacob Marley. The Ghost sits in front of Scrooge bound by chains, and explains his condition: “I wear the chains I forged in life,” replied the Ghost, “I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on by my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it.” Marley then informs Scrooge that if he could see them, he would find that even longer chains bind Scrooge. How did these misers lose their freedom? And how does Scrooge regain his?

Greed is the singular pursuit of one’s self interest. It leads to the hoarding of possessions, which cannot be given away. In contrast, one way of thinking about generosity is in terms free will, where one resolves to make good use of one’s freedom³. An act of generosity is born of freedom because a person doesn’t have to give their time or money to others. They give it freely, out of—as we say—generosity. The greedy person is ruled by self-interest. Conversely, as one philosopher writes, “To be generous is to be free of self, of one’s petty little deeds and possessions, one’s little resentments and jealousies”⁴.

The holiday season is in part a celebration of generosity, and Dickens’ classic story explores this virtue and the consequences of a life of greed. By examining his miserly existence and the possibility of an alternate life of generosity, Scrooge is saved from a sad end. As some of the last lines of Dickens’ story read, “It was always said of [Scrooge] that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.”

³ Andre Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues* p. 94.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95