

# Ebenezer Scrooge and the Free Society

by Howard Baetjer Jr.

**B**ehaving in a self-interested manner does not mean disregarding others. On the contrary, because we are social beings who depend on, and often care deeply about many others around us, a sound attention to our self-interest must include a great deal of concern for others.

However true we may see this to be on a moment's reflection, many of us often lose sight of it, especially in our political and economic thinking. Particularly in regard to the free economy, a vague equating of selfishness and capitalism often infects people's thinking. The very word capitalism brings to many minds grim visions of ruthless characters damning the public interest or selling their mothers for farthings.

The archetype of the antisocial capitalist is Ebenezer Scrooge of Charles Dickens' classic tale, "A Christmas Carol." In Dickens' words, "Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster."

As many who attack the market would have it, Scrooge embodies the spiritual ruin of capitalism; he is the type toward which all capi-

talists tend. Indeed, I have a dear friend who jibes at my free market sympathies by quoting Scrooge's attitude about Christmas donations for the poor: "Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?"

It is as if he believes that supporting the free market means forswearing kindness, as if simply entering the competitive whirl of business contaminates individuals with an attitude of competitiveness—or rather of strife—that poisons their relationships, distorts their perspective, and destroys their feeling for the brotherhood of man.

The widespread notion that free markets are corrupting is rooted at least in part in the innocent truism that for the market to work people must act according to self-interest. Without the motivation of self-interest, there would be no profit seeking, no price competition, no production and exchange. True enough, the market requires self-interested behavior.

But many make an illogical leap from this truism to a falsehood: that if one is self-interested, one cannot be other-interested. Many see an either/or choice. Scrooge can care about Scrooge, or he can care about others: the poor, his clerk Bob Cratchit, Cratchit's family, including lame Tiny Tim, and so on. He cannot do both.

Supporters of economic liberty will win to their cause very few people who believe in this notion. As long as they see self-interest to be at odds with cherished values of generosity and fellow-feeling, people will not embrace a polit-

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*Mr. Baetjer, a former member of the FEE staff, is a doctoral student at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia. This essay originally appeared as a chapter in Ideas on Liberty: Essays in Honor of Paul L. Poirot, published by FEE.*



ical economy based on self-interest. Thus a task for lovers of liberty is to point out that self-interest and interest in others are not at odds, that in fact they go together.

They do. In fact, that is one of the main lessons "A Christmas Carol" teaches. The point of the story is that Ebenezer Scrooge, the archetypal "greedy capitalist," becomes immeasurably happier when and because he gives up his selfishness and becomes generously involved with those around him. There is no suggestion that he gives up his capitalism; in fact, Dickens tells us that he is at his desk early the day after Christmas. He just broadens his other activities and ends.

A quick recapitulation for those who may have forgotten the story: After refusing his nephew's invitation to Christmas dinner, re-

fusing to donate anything to a Christmas fund for the poor, driving away a boy singing Christmas carols, and only grudgingly granting Bob Cratchit Christmas Day off, Scrooge goes home to a harrowing night. He is visited by the ghost of his old partner, and then in succession the ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet To Come. The ghosts open his eyes to the joy of his past Christmases, the opportunities he is missing in this one, and the unhappy end he faces if he keeps on his present isolated course. The next day, joyous that he can change the future by changing his behavior, he sends a prize turkey to the Cratchits, promises a large gift to the fund for the poor, goes to dinner at his nephew's, and generally enjoys himself hugely. Afterward, "it was always said of him,

that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.”

## Scrooge's Mistake

This lovely tale emphasizes a point about economic man that is of overriding importance to the spiritual case for liberty. That is, maximizing money income is quite a different thing from maximizing well-being. For all his profit motive, Scrooge before the ghosts' visits is not acting to “maximize his utility,” in the economists' term. In his mania for money, he is a cold, loveless, bitter man. In economic terms again, the opportunity cost of his ceaseless accumulation of assets is the far greater wealth in “psychic income”—pleasure—that he forgoes. No doubt Scrooge is doing what he perceives to be in his self-interest—each of us is *homo economicus* to that extent—but as the ghosts show Scrooge, he is making catastrophic mistakes.

As he hears his nephew say, at Christmas dinner in the dream, “the consequence of his taking a dislike to us, and not making merry with us, is, I think, that he loses some pleasant moments, which could do him no harm. I am sure he loses pleasanter companions than he can find in his own thoughts, either in his mouldy old office, or his dusty chambers.” Scrooge loses music, laughter, blind-man's buff and other games. He loses all sorts of things that, as he observes them by the Spirit's side, have tremendous appeal. His maniacal attention to money simply cannot be called self-interested.

The next day Scrooge leaves his ledgers behind for once and goes unexpectedly to his nephew's house. Christmas dinner transpires as he had seen it in the dream, except that now he participates: “Wonderful party, wonderful games, wonderful unanimity, wonderful happiness!” He has progressed from unhappiness to happiness in an evening, thanks to a change in focus from narrow money concerns alone to a broader concern that includes the rewards of positive human relationships.

A related point is that among the greatest psychic satisfactions available to human beings are those that come simply from doing something for others we care about. I would not be

misunderstood here: I am not talking about any benefit to those we care for, but just about the benefit to ourselves—the happy satisfaction, the warm glow, the serene contentment for us—that comes as a result of benefiting others.

It is rather like a pure market exchange: there is benefit on both sides. Scrooge, newly concerned for the bravely struggling Cratchit family, gives them a prize turkey. They benefit thereby; indeed, they are probably transported with delight. But they don't benefit any more than Scrooge. For him the cost of the gift is only the price of the turkey, while the benefit to him, the psychic return in joy, is, well, let us get it exactly: “I'll send it to Bob Cratchit's,” whispered Scrooge, rubbing his hands, and splitting with a laugh. . . . The chuckle with which he paid for the turkey, and the chuckle with which he paid for the cab, and the chuckle with which he recompensed the boy, were only to be exceeded by the chuckle with which he sat down breathless in his chair again, and chuckled till he cried.”

Because others are important to us, it is in our own self-interest to give some attention to their well-being and, putting it impersonally, to invest in our relationships with them. These considerations apply beyond family and close acquaintances to the communities of which we are a part. Because we do live in our communities, community morale and standard of living have a bearing on our own quality of life. Hence it is self-interested to pay attention to the community and do what we reasonably can to improve it.

The Ghost of Christmas Present faces Scrooge with this in the persons of two children that cling to his robes:

They were a boy and a girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility. . . . “They are man's,” said the Spirit, looking down upon them. “And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware of them both, and all of their degree. . . .” “Have they no refuge or resource?” cried Scrooge. “Are there no prisons!” said the Spirit. . . . “Are there no workhouses?”

Here we must be careful to grant the validity of

Dickens' point without guessing at his policy prescriptions. Experience with the Poor Law in his time, as well as many years of experience with the modern welfare state, show how very difficult it is to help poor people. Often the effort to do so, especially in a bureaucratic structure that operates by rule rather than by judgment about individual needs, creates disincentives to self-help, and thereby perpetuates poverty. The workhouses which Dickens hates were a government effort to care for the poor. The best we can do for such unhappy souls may well be not to give them much, but rather to work for the repeal of bad laws which obstruct their advancement. In any case, the point remains that since our lives and fortunes are tied up with theirs, it is in our self-interest to do what we may to improve their quality of life. Charity can be at once generous and self-interested.

## The Importance of Spiritual Goods

Another lesson of "A Christmas Carol" that can fortify the spiritual case for liberty is that material goods are often a prerequisite for spiritual goods. We tend sometimes to think that there is an either/or choice among these, too. Either we concern ourselves with "higher" matters of love, community, and doing well by others (good!), or we concern ourselves with the "low" business of producing and accumulating physical stuff (bad!).

But we are creatures of flesh and blood as well as of spirit, and we must be fed, clothed, and sheltered adequately if the spirit is to soar. We can do little for others or ourselves if we lack the means to do it with. And ultimately all money—indeed, all material goods—are means to spiritual or psychic ends. We don't want them for themselves, but for the satisfactions they can give. Scrooge discovers during the ghosts' visits that his piles of wealth are valueless to him if all he ever does is pile up more. Not until he uses his money does he "cash in" on the psychic satisfactions that are the point of the whole endeavor:

Consider the story's final episode, when Scrooge reveals his changed self to Cratchit. He says earnestly:

"A merry Christmas, Bob! . . . A merrier Christmas, Bob, my good fellow, than I have given you for many a year! I'll raise your salary, and endeavor to assist your struggling family, and we will discuss your affairs this very afternoon, over a Christmas bowl of smoking bishop, Bob! Make up the fires, and buy another coal scuttle before you dot another i, Bob Cratchit!"

Good for generous Scrooge! His attention now encompasses the "higher matter" of his clerk's well-being. (By the way, observes the economist, Cratchit's productivity will probably increase substantially.) But how could Scrooge be generous without his cash? What would pay the higher salary, go to assist the family, buy the Christmas bowl and extra coal? Praise the Lord for Scrooge's money and his ability to earn it! May he continue to do so! It's cash that lets a generous impulse become a generous deed.

Now of course I don't mean to imply that in a free economy all will realize the extent to which their happiness increases by generous concern for others. Certainly in a free society some people will choose a low, selfish, small-spirited, narrow way of life. Surely they will be less happy because of this choice than they would otherwise be. And not all of them will have Scrooge's good luck in being brought back to his senses by the intervention of kindly Spirits of some kind. This is to be lamented.

But this unfortunate choice of a less happy rather than a more happy way of life is just that—a choice. It is not caused by the free society which allows it; it is caused by the individual's own short-sightedness, unwisdom, and inability to perceive that real self-interest depends substantially on other-regarding activities.

The good life involves a judicious balance of self- and other-regarding activities. When the balance is a healthy one, these two reinforce each other and merge. The wonderful thing about the free society is that it allows human beings such broad scope in which to pursue and fulfill all their values, whatever they may be—material, personal, spiritual—and puts in our way an abundance of resources and opportunities with which to pursue them all. □

# The Liberating Arts

by Edmund A. Opitz

The recent movie called *Out of Africa* has acquainted millions of Americans with the name of a Danish Baroness Blixen, whose pen name was Isak Dinesen. The movie is based on Dinesen's 1938 book, a semi-autobiographical work called *Out of Africa*. Four years earlier, in 1934, Isak Dinesen had published a work entitled *Seven Gothic Tales*, really seven short novels within the covers of a single book. One of these Gothic tales was set in the Paris of several generations ago and consisted mainly of the reminiscences of an old gentleman. There is a story within this larger story involving an Armenian organ grinder and his pet monkey. Some of you may recall seeing this type of street musician who would wander through city neighborhoods carrying, slung over his shoulder, a kind of music box the size of an accordion, a crank on its side. This contraption was set atop a pole, which supported the weight of the music machine when the man stopped to perform. The man would be dressed in a sort of gypsy costume, and as the entertainer cranked out his tunes his little capuchin monkey would pass through the crowd collecting coins, which he'd turn over to his master. This in itself was quite a stunt; but this little monkey was cleverer than most of his kind, because his master had taught him to perform a great variety of crowd-pleasing tricks, each one triggered by a word of command—in Armenian.

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*The Reverend Mr. Opitz is a member of the staff of The Foundation for Economic Education and is the author of the book Religion and Capitalism: Allies, Not Enemies. "The Liberating Arts" was presented as a FEE Seminar lecture in Alderbrook, Washington, earlier this year.*

The Armenian died, and the little animal came into the possession of a kindly French couple who housed the monkey and fed him well. Time passed, and although the animal was properly cared for, he languished; he seemed to know that he had talents lying dormant which no one knew how to bring out. There was no one to voice the magic Armenian words. Lots of potential talent was trapped inside the little beast, but no one knew how to release it; the key had been lost.

It is my guess that Isak Dinesen intended this little story to be a parable of the human condition. Translate the parable and it suggests that individual men and women are loaded with potential talents of all sorts—talents unlimited—but these potentialities are locked up inside us and become actual only when touched by a magic wand from without—the magic wand called “education.”

The scholastic curriculum labeled “liberal arts education” emerged, developed, and grew—in the course of centuries—in order to give the young people of each successive generation the tools of learning, tools which they could then use to free themselves from the hindrances and obstructions, the ignorance and taboos which prevented them from becoming the kind of persons they had it in them to be. The “liberal arts,” in other words, were the “liberating arts”; they freed the individual person from all that prevented him from realizing his full potential. The ultimate goal of liberal education is wisdom and understanding—a broader and deeper understanding of human nature and the human condition, and a few clues as to the pur-