

EBENEZER SCROOGE – MAN OF PRINCIPLE

Scott C. Lowe

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'Bah! Humbug!' It's the most famous line in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, but is it the most important? Surely not, for this Christmas classic is not centrally about Christmas, but about a man, the holiday being the convenient setting for his transformation. What kind of transformation? Why a moral transformation of course, because the man, Ebenezer Scrooge, through multiple encounters with the spirit world, becomes a good man by the end of the story. But where does this story begin, what are we to think of Scrooge at the outset and how is his transformation accomplished? These are the questions I take up here, for while Scrooge is tightfisted, covetous and hard-hearted, he is still a man of principle. Judged by the standards of some views on ethics, Scrooge isn't actually all that bad. How can that be? Let's start with a quick overview of two centuries of ethical theory.

Since the Enlightenment, ethical theorists have focused on figuring out what our duties and obligations are to one another. So, rather than being concerned with deciding what characteristics make one a *good person* (which Scrooge is not), ethicists have turned to devising principles from which we determine which is the *correct action* to perform (which even Scrooge does). The current debate in ethics is dominated by two views which have been on the scene for several centuries – utilitarianism, championed by important historical figures such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, and Kantianism, as developed by its namesake, the 18th century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. Both of these theories follow the pattern of identifying a fundamental value expressed through a foundational principle and then using that principle as a guide to action.

Utilitarianism is based on the Greatest Happiness Principle. It tells us that we ought in any situation of choice, choose that action which will maximize the overall happiness or pleasure for all people affected by my action, 'each counting for one, no one for more than one,' as Bentham tells us. The utilitarian identifies happiness or pleasure as the fundamental value, expresses that value through the Greatest Happiness Principle, and then uses it as a guide to how we ought to act. Thus, for the utilitarian telling a lie is wrong insofar as it tends to bring about a greater overall amount of unhappiness or disutility over happiness or utility.

The Kantian advocates a different principle. The Kantian claims that the fundamental value in ethics is found in the inherent dignity and worth of humans as beings with rationality and free will. How such beings are to be treated is expressed through a basic principle that Kant called the categorical imperative. One way of stating this principle is that we ought always treat humanity, ourselves or others, as an end in itself and never merely as a means to an end. As complicated as this sounds, it really captures the familiar idea that it is wrong to *use* people in ways that demean their inherent worth; wrong to treat them as if their only value is in what they can do for you, do to further your own ends or purposes. So, for instance, theft is wrong because it uses others as a source of material goods without the owner's consent, lying is wrong because it values others only for what they can be deceived into doing, etc.

While the utilitarians and Kantians have dominated the debate in ethics, they have not been without their challengers. One of the most important of these challenges comes from the perspective of virtue theory. Virtue theory, drawing on the work of Aristotle, emerged (or re-emerged) in the latter half of the last century, in part as a response to perceived failings of utilitarianism and Kantianism. In contrast to those theories, virtue theory emphasizes the role of *character* in moral judgment. Here what kind of person you are, whether you display the appropriate traits of character, the

appropriate virtues, is paramount. On virtue theory actions are not unimportant, but they definitely take a back seat in judging whether or not someone is overall a good person. For the virtue theorist, telling a particular lie might well be wrong, but more important is how that lie fits into the overall assessment of the person's character. The more important question is, 'Is he a liar?'

Though I don't think Charles Dickens was doing theoretic ethics in writing *A Christmas Carol*, his portrayal of Ebenezer Scrooge clearly illustrates this concern with the role of character in morality. One might argue that Scrooge is a caricature of the early Victorian utilitarian. The growing influence of utilitarians such as Mill in the mid-19th century would have been well known to someone like Dickens, and Bentham, a prominent figure of the day, had died just a decade before the writing of *A Christmas Carol*. Further, the numerous references in the story to ledgers, balance sheets, business, poor houses and the like suggests a familiarity with the kind of calculations of social welfare that are at the heart of utilitarianism. So perhaps Scrooge is a utilitarian. But nothing turns on this point; perhaps Scrooge is really a Kantian. Whatever guides him, Scrooge is a man of principle; he believes that his actions are justified and that others have no right to demand more of him.

Indeed, judged by his actions alone, Scrooge is a moral man, if all we mean by that is that he does not violate common moral principles. Nowhere in the story do we read of Scrooge lying, cheating or defrauding anyone. Scrooge is a hardnosed man of business no doubt, but he lives according to those hardnosed principles and expects no less from others. Consider several descriptions of Scrooge offered in the text, certainly unflattering, but which include no claim that Scrooge is dishonest, untrustworthy, a cheat or a fraud. In the opening paragraphs we are told that Ebenezer Scrooge is a 'squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner' who is 'hard and sharp as flint,' but not a cheat or a thief. Over the Christmas dinner table, Mrs. Cratchit balks at following her

husband's lead in toasting Scrooge, describing him as an 'odious, stingy, hard, unfeeling man,' but not a liar or a fraud. And nephew Fred, responding to his guests' disparagement of Scrooge, says that his 'offenses carry their own punishment,' but not that the state has any punishment in store for him. In fact, Scrooge is the only one whose rights are violated. The last spirit to visit, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, shows him a possible future, one in which the charwoman, laundress and undertaker's assistant arrive simultaneously at the pawnbroker's laden with what they have stolen from Scrooge on his deathbed. So, judged by familiar basic moral rules expressed in the language of rights and duties, Scrooge is not so bad, he meets the moral minimum we might say.

Yet, Ebenezer Scrooge clearly *is* a bad man, the success of the story turns on this fact. What carries the story along, of course, is the transformation of Scrooge from being a bad man, a man of bad character, into a good man. How is this change accomplished? Certainly not by discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of various moral principles. Rather, in a way that contemporary virtue theorists are fond of, Scrooge learns through example. What the Spirits show him are the results of his actions, the outcome, or potential outcome, of his actions on his own life and the lives of others. It is only by being forced to see these lives up close, his own, but especially others', that Scrooge comes to have the empathy necessary to try to be a better person. The story opens on Christmas Eve with Scrooge putting into practice some of his hardnosed moral principles. Approached by two gentlemen requesting 'some slight provision for the Poor and Destitute,' Scrooge responds by asking if the workhouses, treadmill and Poor Law are still in full effect. Assured by the gentlemen that they are, Scrooge retorts, 'Oh! I was afraid, from what you said at first, that something had occurred to stop them in their useful course,' and that, 'I help to support the establishments I have mentioned – they cost enough; and those who are badly off must go there.' So we are introduced to

Scrooge as a man who has moral principles, they just don't lead him to do actions that are charitable or empathetic. Having scrupulously paid his taxes, he is not going to part with a penny more.

But change is in the air and Scrooge's transformation is soon foretold by the appearance of the ghost of Jacob Marley, Scrooge's late business partner. At first attributing this apparition to indigestion ('There's more of gravy than of grave about you...'), Scrooge concedes that he is in the presence of a spirit from another realm. Marley, weighed down by the chains he made in life 'link by link, and yard by yard', warns him of the coming of three spirits who are Scrooge's only hope if he is to avoid Marley's fate. Still not grasping what is at stake, Scrooge is hesitant to meet these spirits one at a time; 'Couldn't I take 'em all at once, and have it over with, Jacob?'. Apparently not, for each spirit visits Scrooge in turn, the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present, and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. These spirits show Scrooge many things, but just a few examples will illustrate Scrooge's growing empathy which culminates in his becoming a better, indeed quite good, person. The first ghost, the Ghost of Christmas Past, shows us a younger Scrooge, one not yet so hardened as the elderly man, but on his way. We meet Scrooge's fiancée, Belle, as she is breaking off their engagement. Belle tells Scrooge that she is releasing him from their 'contract' because he is a changed person and no longer loves her. She does not speak of him violating a promise or failing in a duty. Rather, it is the change in his character that is separating them. Scrooge's greed and avarice are overtaking him and Belle realizes that she is no longer as important to him. She tells Scrooge that a new idol, a 'golden one', has displaced her in his heart and that he is not the good (but poor) person to whom she became engaged. 'I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master-passion, Gain, engrosses you.' This scene is hard for Scrooge to watch and, beginning to see the error of his ways, he begs

the spirit to take him home, asking ‘Why do you delight to torture me?’

The same spirit also shows Scrooge a happier scene, one in which he recognizes the value of another’s generosity. We meet Mr. Fezziwig, to whom Scrooge was apprenticed as a young man. Fezziwig is everything that Scrooge is not. It is Christmas Eve and Fezziwig calls the work to close early so that they may prepare for the evening’s festivities. In pour neighbors by the dozen and there is a fiddler and dancing and ‘a great piece of Cold Roast, and there was a great piece of Cold Boiled, and there were mince-pies, and plenty of beer.’ All provided unstintingly by Fezziwig, not because he has a duty to do so, but just because it is Christmas. Scrooge is so engrossed in these festivities that he forgets about the spirit until, baiting him, the ghost comments, ‘A small matter...to make these silly folks so full of gratitude,’ adding that Fezziwig has expended but a few pounds to pay for the evening. Scrooge is incensed,

It isn’t that, Spirit. He has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil. Say that his power lies in words and looks; in things so slight and insignificant that it is impossible to add and count them up: what then? The happiness he gives, is quite as great as if it cost a fortune.

As Scrooge pauses reflectively, the spirit asks what concerns him. ‘Nothing in particular... I should like to be able to say a word or two to my clerk just now! That’s all.’

With the next spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Present, Scrooge is shown the life of his clerk, Bob Cratchit, something of which Scrooge clearly knows little. We are taken to the Cratchit home on Christmas day. It is a small four-roomed house in a run-down neighborhood. Cratchit lives there with his wife and six children including, of course, the crippled youngest child, Tiny Tim. Here a holiday

celebration is also underway, equally festive as that at Fezziwig's though not nearly so sumptuous. There is great joy in what this family shares together despite their poverty. And despite their poverty, Scrooge recognizes the goodness of their home compared to his cold, dark and lonely rooms.

There was nothing of high mark in this. They were not a handsome family; they were not well dressed; their shoes were far from being water-proof; their clothes were scanty... But, they were happy, grateful, pleased with one another, and contented with the time; and when they faded, and looked happier yet in the bright sprinklings of the Spirit's torch at parting, Scrooge had his eye upon them, and especially on Tiny Tim, until the last.

With the final spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, Scrooge's transformation is complete. Upon being shown his own forlorn grave, Scrooge cries out, 'I am not the man I was... I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse.' What has brought about this change has everything to do with Scrooge recognizing the failings of his own bad character, and nothing to do with maximizing the overall happiness or conforming his actions to the categorical imperative. In so emphasizing the rightness or wrongness of actions, utilitarians and Kantians miss this important part of our everyday understanding of morality. We don't just judge Scrooge's actions, 'That act was hard-hearted,' 'That act was fair.' Rather, we judge him, we judge his character as a whole. By this point in the story Scrooge has become a good man, a man of good character, one who, whatever he does, he does out of more generous, charitable, empathetic and humane motives. His transformation is one of character, not of action. So let us close with a quote from the end of *A Christmas Carol*, not Tiny Tim's well worn holiday greeting, but Dickens' summation of the reformed Scrooge – 'He became as good a

friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world.’

Scott Lowe is Professor of Philosophy at Bloomsburg University in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania.