



In Defense of Scrooge? by Laura Andrews

Link to original article: [In Defense of Scrooge](#)

What could be said in defense of the Old Scrooge? The hard, tight fisted, miserly old man who grudges his employee's one paid day off? And could we actually find fault with poor Bob Cratchit, who works long, underpaid hours to maintain his family? Michael Levin says there is a lot to say in Scrooge's vindication, and that we can indeed find fault with Cratchit.

He argues, among other things, that Scrooge was an entrepreneur who was actually doing society good, that he was perfectly happy, and that Cratchit worked for Scrooge because he wanted to, and could have found a job anywhere else if he'd really wanted to. So let's examine his arguments.

The second paragraph of Levin's article states,

"To appreciate [the things that Scrooge supposedly got right], it is necessary first to distinguish Scrooge's outlook on life from his disagreeable persona. He is said to have a pointed nose and a harsh voice, but not all hardheaded businessmen are so lamentably endowed, nor are their feckless nephews (remember Fred?) always 'ruddy and handsome' and possessed of pretty wives. These touches of the storyteller's art only bias the issue."

First of all, Scrooge's disagreeable persona is a natural outworking of his cold nature. He never smiles and never has a pleasant word for anyone.

Secondly, Dickens often employed a 'character externalized' approach to writing. In other words, people would be described as having features corresponding to their surroundings or personalities. In Scrooge's case, he has a hard, cold, bitter nature, and this is shown by Dickens' description of him:

"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. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him..."

Now, obviously, someone could look like this. This isn't exaggerated, as some of Dickens' characterizations in other books were. He will still look much the same after his transformation, of course, but he will be different; and the change of heart will affect everything. Someone who smiles and is kind is going to look far different from someone who frowns and never has a nice word to say.

Next, Levin says that obviously, if Cratchit is working for Scrooge, then he must be where he wants to be, he must be getting fair wages, and he must be able to just find another job anywhere else. What Levin apparently does not realize is that many people cannot always work where they would like to. They may not be able to find other work, or perhaps other work would pay even less than miserly old Scrooge.

Which brings us to our next point: that Cratchit must be getting fair wages. How can we infer that Scrooge would be paying him what he ought to? Often, people have to just take the pay they get, or settle for nothing. And, of course, some money is better than none. Bob Cratchit may not be particularly gifted, and might, even in the best of times, have a hard time finding another job. He might have not even had time to look for another, since he worked long hours for Scrooge already. Whatever the case, we cannot lay all the blame on Cratchit. He is obviously not lazy. He does his job, and does it well, or else Scrooge would have dismissed him long ago. I don't think there is a case to be made in this respect.

Levin also argues that Scrooge is not responsible for Cratchit's family, and that it was irresponsible of him to have that many children if he could not afford them.

If Scrooge has hired a man with six children to take care of, he should be even more willing to pay him the fair amount. And especially if one of those children is a cripple who could be helped. We know that Scrooge had a whole lot of money, which he didn't use for himself. So why didn't he use it in helping his employee?

Levin leaves no room in his article for charity, for a free and open hand in Scrooge's dealings with his fellow men (most especially Cratchit, the fellow man nearest him). Instead, Levin's world is one of hard, cold dealing, and doesn't factor in the suffering of others who could be helped.

He fails to see that Dickens was operating, not on a socialist worldview, wherein the government forcibly takes from one man to give to another, discouraging hard work and rewarding laziness; he was actually working from a Biblical worldview, which is one of charity. The Bible says that if a man does not work, neither should he eat; but that is completely irrelevant to this situation, since Cratchit is a hardworking man. It's not like he is going around looking for handouts.

Regarding the issue of Cratchit's one lump of coal, I quote Levin:

"If he (Cratchit) stays there, he shows by his behavior that he prefers his present wages-plus-comfort package to any other he has found, or supposes himself likely to find. Actions speak louder than grumbling, and the reader can hardly complain about what Cratchit evidently finds satisfactory."

This is faulty logic, and relates to the above points about Cratchit not being able to find a better job. First, Scrooge has more coal in his fire, but he denies Cratchit enough to even warm himself. Is this right? Second, why would Cratchit be grumbling about something he supposedly finds 'satisfactory'? There are a lot of things in life that we can't change, and we just have to bear them. I'd say it's mighty unfair to say that Cratchit is grumbling about something he doesn't mind (does that even make sense?). Third, Cratchit never actually complains, either to Scrooge or to his wife.

Levin then goes on to the issue of workhouses, and says that, since Scrooge is forced to pay taxes to support prisons and workhouses, *"it is not unreasonable for him to balk at volunteering additional funds for their extra comfort"*.

Well, perhaps not, if they were trying to force him to do so. But Scrooge has merely been asked to give money to men unconnected to the government; there's no forcing involved.

Again missing the point, Levin says that if the workhouses were made more pleasant, then the poor would be unmotivated to find jobs. So because of this, Scrooge can't part with a little bit of money to provide some comfort for some people on Christmas? Would Levin even think that was a good thing to do? Would he rather that all the poor were made or kept miserable?

Levin says that Cratchit, in asking for a paid Christmas holiday, is not being 'fair', and that he has apparently forgotten the golden rule in regards to Scrooge. Cratchit, it says, would object to a request that he work for a day without being paid. Levin makes it sound as though Cratchit forced Scrooge to pay him for a day off. But there is no indication of this in the book. Scrooge, apparently, decides it's in his best interests to do so (or otherwise he would not do it). There is no law forcing Scrooge to let Cratchit have the day off, or to pay him for that day off.

Levin continues:

"The biggest of the Big Lies about Scrooge is the pointlessness of his pursuit of money. 'Wealth is of no use to him. He doesn't do any good with it,' opines ruddy nephew Fred."

Levin goes on to say that he does do good by lending money to people, thereby helping a homeowner put a new roof on his house, and a tea merchant makes a profit and benefits tea drinkers.

He misses the whole point. Scrooge has plenty of money of his own. Of course he's going to use his money to lend it to different people, because that's his business and he makes money at it.

But Scrooge is a miser.

Definiton of miser: a person who hoards wealth and spends as little money as possible.

So whatever he's doing with his money related to his business, when he dies where does it go?

He apparently isn't leaving it to Fred, his only living relative. Of course he's not leaving it to a charity.

Therefore, he isn't purposely doing any good with it. Whatever is done with the money he lends is no concern of his, as long as he gets his own back with interest.

Levin says,

"Dickens doesn't mention Scrooge's satisfied customers, but there must have been plenty of them for Scrooge to have gotten so rich."

Well obviously. And Dickens does mention it; Scrooge tells Marley's ghost that 'you were always a good man of business', and at other points the same thing is said of Scrooge. Of course there were satisfied customers. Again, it's not the point. Scrooge is in the business of making money just to make money, as an end in itself and not a means of doing anything, for himself or others.

Another point (which may actually have been made in another, similar article written by someone else) is that Tiny Tim is only one of many such children suffering and soon to die an early death. Does this mean that, because Scrooge can't help all of them, he should help none? I wouldn't think so.

Levin imagines a hypothetical 'Sickly Sid', whose father has borrowed money from Scrooge, but can't get the operation for his son because Cratchit has not paid back the money he owes to Scrooge.

This is ridiculous. Dickens never even hints that Cratchit has borrowed from his employer; if he had, then he would have used the money to help Tiny Tim. Secondly, if he hadn't paid it back, then wouldn't Scrooge have simply taken it out of Cratchit's paycheck? Thirdly, Sickly Sid is a distraction from the real problem of Tiny Tim, who is not hypothetical, and who really needs help. Scrooge could help him out of charity while still lending money to Sickly Sid's father.

Levin again: *'Scrooge doesn't seem to get much satisfaction from the services he may inadvertently perform, and that seems to be part of Dickens's point. But who, apart from Dickens, says that Scrooge is not enjoying himself? He spends all his time at his business, likes to count his money, and has no outside interests.*

At the same time, Scrooge is not given to brooding and shows absolutely no sign of depression or conflict. Whether he wished to or not, Dickens has made Scrooge by far the most intelligent character in his fable, and Dickens credits his creation with having nothing "fancy" about him. So we conclude that, in his undemonstrative way, Scrooge is productive and satisfied with his lot, which is to say happy.'

I don't really get this. Is Levin saying that Scrooge is just as satisfied being a miser as he would be if he were charitable? Is Levin implying that real happiness can be had when no attempt is made to be kind? Of course Scrooge is intelligent; he's an excellent man of business; but that has nothing to do with the fact that he's a mean, stingy old man who doesn't give two figs for anyone and is unwilling to part with any of his money to help anyone who cannot benefit him in return.

I guess to save face, Levin leaves us with this gem: *'There can be no arguing with Dickens's wish to show the spiritual advantages of love. But there was no need to make the object of his lesson an entrepreneur whose ideas and practices benefit his employees, society at large, and himself. Must such a man expect no fairer a fate than to die scorned and alone? Bah, I say. Humbug.'*

In the process, Michael Levin simply makes himself sound like the Old Scrooge; even going so far as to say 'humbug'!

I would ask Levin: who better to show a change of heart than in someone who *can* do good, and *won't*?

As Scrooge learns by the end of the book, mankind is, or should be, his business. He can continue to lend money and be a successful businessman; I don't think anyone would try to deny him that. But he has now found something more: a purpose in his life beyond simply hoarding his money and sitting in his office all day.

And yes, someone like the Old Scrooge is going to die scorned and alone, no matter how well he ran his business, for the simple fact that he purposely endeared himself to no one. He may be rich, but riches won't buy him anything beyond a nice casket and a nice tombstone.

For myself, I think that Levin's article is a sad attempt at vindicating an obvious villain by making silly assumptions, pulling arguments out of thin air, and completely ignoring everything that makes *A Christmas Carol* a classic tale.