“God Bless Us, Every One!”: The “Good” of Victorian “Business” in A Christmas Carol

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The conviviality of Victorian Christmas traditions can be traced to Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol. Published in 1843, Dickens revives the long-lost vigour of Christmas practices that had dissipated as a result of Puritan authority during the mid-seventeenth century. He tells the tale of an old and very rich business man, Ebenezer Scrooge, who is visited by three ghosts on Christmas Eve. These ghosts reveal to him glimpses of his past, present and future, ultimately stirring within him a heart of generosity that is reflective of the Victorian concept of the “Christmas spirit.”

Richard Kelly discusses these forgotten customs in his Introduction to A Christmas Carol. For instance, the pagan practices that had been adopted by Christians in the Middle Ages, the Ancient Roman recognition of the god of Agriculture during Saturnalia, and the German celebration of Yule influenced the English festivities captured in Dickens’ rejuvenation and secularization of the Christmas season (Kelly 9). Celebratory customs centered on communal bonding, music, dancing, food and generosity. Along with early nineteenth-century historical surveys such as a Selection of Christmas Carols, Ancient and Modern (1833) by William Sandy, and Thomas K. Hervey’s The Book of Christmas (1837), Dickens’ A Christmas Carol punctuated the revival and definition of the Christmas spirit that “aroused the nostalgia of urban Victorians” in a growingly urbanized England (Kelly 10).
By combating the “heady capitalist decades of the 1830s and 1840s” (Kelly 12), Dickens’ work asserts that Christmas is, as he would later define it in his essay “What Christmas Is, As We Grow Older” (1851), “the spirit of active usefulness, perseverance, cheerful discharge of duty, kindness, and forbearance! It is in these last virtues especially, that we are, or should be strengthened by the unaccomplished visions of your youth” (Appendix A.7 183-184). The values of congeniality and productivity appear to be contradictory but are, in *A Christmas Carol*, revealed to be symbiotic. The profits of industry and commerce can be used to help others and can therefore be motivated by compassion as opposed to greed. This contrast illuminates the “paradoxical mixture” (Kelly 10) of capitalist self-production and the sociable generosity of human nature within Dickens’ model of Victorian virtue. Dickens experienced the hardships of poverty as a young boy working in Warren’s Blacking Warehouse, placing labels on bottles during his father’s imprisonment in Marshalsea Prison for unpaid debts. Drawing on these childhood privations, Dickens highlights the destitution of the working class in an urbanized England and constructs a definition of Christmas that appeals to the human powers of compassion that are able to operate simultaneously with one’s productivity.

Dickens’ paradigm of the Christmas season illuminates the paradox of individual capitalism and social charity within Victorian conduct.

The novel’s binary motif of “the sacred,” distinguished from “the secular,” can be discerned by the various uses of the terms “business” and “good” within the context of Christmas in Dickens’ novel. When conveying the self-isolation of individual industry, “business” is used to mean “diligent labour” or “a person’s official duty, part or province; function, occupation” (“Business,” OED). In terms of sociability, “business” can be defined as “care, attention and observance” (“Business,” OED). The meaning of “good” also transforms as Scrooge develops kindness and becomes a man of Christian spirit. “Good,” used in the changing contexts of financial gain and moral propriety, can be defined as, “to do good to,
to benefit (a person)” (“Good,” OED). This essay closely examines the novel’s use of language in capturing the tensions within Victorian Christmas. Dickens’ paradigm of the Christmas season illuminates the paradox of individual capitalism and social charity within Victorian conduct. The growing utilitarianism of Victorian society and the increasing need for generosity can be demonstrated by the tension between industrious isolation and charitable community surrounding the term “business,” as well as by the shift from contexts of productivity to moral circumstances of the word “good.”

First, A Christmas Carol unveils a paradoxical tension between the Christmas virtues of “active usefulness” and “kindness” (Appendix A.7 183) through the contexts surrounding “business.” Dickens associates an individual focus on “active usefulness” (183) with materialism, “isolation, ignorance, cruelty, cold, and the withholding of generosity and love” (Kelly 14). In contrast, the last virtues of kindness and mercy are correlated with sociability and the “magical powers of love and generosity” (Kelly 19). For instance, Dickens introduces Scrooge as a man consumed by his occupation. He writes that “sometimes people new to the business called Scrooge Scrooge, and sometimes Marley, but he answered to both names. It was all the same to him” (Dickens 40). Scrooge’s fixation on his personal industry causes him to forfeit his identity to financial advancement. Dickens’ indication that there are “people new to the business” (40) instead of new in personal acquaintance with Scrooge himself presents Scrooge as a man surrendering his social identity to the isolation of his occupation. “Business” captures the paradox of this paradigm by presenting one’s profession as not only a means of “active usefulness” (Appendix A.7 183), but also as a means to connect with others by helping them through compassionate deeds. Scrooge’s introverted focus on materialism unveils the growing secularism of Victorian society and the need for Christmas to enforce the values of “usefulness, perseverance, cheerful discharge of duty, kindness, and forbearance” (Appendix A.7 183-184) in Dickens’ model of Christmas virtue.

The increasing Victorian focus on industry and social solidarity during Christmas can be further demonstrated by the tension between individual duty and sociability surrounding Scrooge’s acquaintances. For example, Bob Cratchit, Scrooge’s employee who receives a meagre salary, announces during the family Christmas dinner that his son Peter will soon assume a work position. When
Cratchit makes this pronouncement, “the two young Catchits laughed tremendously at the idea of Peter’s being a man of business; and Peter himself looked thoughtfully at the fire [...] as if he were deliberating what particular investment he should favour when he came into the receipt of that bewildering income” (Dickens 90). Peter’s introspective contemplation of his future material gain causes his alienation from the community of the family. His focus on personal industry unveiling the extension of capitalist sentiments to society’s youth. However, the term “business” unveils the binary “secular” and “spiritual” nature of Dickens’ paradigm. The topic of “business” is not only the driving force for Peter’s “introspection and social withdrawal” (Kelly 27). It is, paradoxically, also a means of stimulating family conversation and, therefore, a sense of solidarity. After Bob’s announcement, Martha continues to explain her “business” (i.e. occupation) at a milliner’s shop:

[She] then told them what kind of work she had to do, and how many hours she worked at a stretch, and how she meant to lie a-bed to-morrow morning for a good long rest; to-morrow being a holiday she passed at home. (Dickens 90)

Thus, Martha demonstrates the importance of being industrious while upholding Christian virtues. She recognizes Christmas day as a means of observing the Christian sanctity of a day’s rest.

Furthermore, the need for “kindness and forbearance” (Appendix A.7 184)—not simply within a single family, but within a broader society—can be demonstrated by the dual meanings of the term “business.” For instance, when asked to make a donation to the poor, Scrooge says “‘It’s not my business. [...] ‘It’s enough for a man to understand his own business, and not to interfere with other people’s. Mine occupies me constantly’” (Dickens 45). Taking “business” to denote occupation, Scrooge explains that it is not his professional duty to understand the financial situation of the poor. He secludes himself physically from society by allowing all of his time to be consumed by his trade. However, by understanding “business” to indicate “care, attention or observance” (“Business,” OED), Dickens reveals that those that are “caught up in selfish pursuits [are] blinded ... to the needs of other people” (Kelly 19). His preoccupation with his financial “business” causes his wilful ignorance of the
“business” (i.e. concerns, matters) of others. The word “business” thus exposes the paradox of Dickens’ model by re-defining one’s occupation as not only a means of industry, but also as an obligation to be morally dutiful by economically assisting others.

Moreover, the appearance of Jacob Marley’s ghost provides Scrooge with a spiritual-like context to recognize the “secular” and “spiritual” meanings of “business.” When Scrooge compliments Marley’s ghost by stating, “‘But you were always a good man of business’” (Dickens 56), Marley cries, “‘Business!’... ‘Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!’” (56). Scrooge’s use of “business” refers to Marley’s aptitude in and preoccupation with secular industriousness. However, Marley appeals to Dickens’ “kindness and forbearance” (Appendix A.7 183) by contrasting Scrooge’s meaning of “business” with his denotation of “business” as “concern.” By emphasizing the insignificant moral value of material profit, Marley addresses the secularization of Victorian society and the need for an increasing societal fixation on “active usefulness” (182) in both an industrial and a moral (Christian charity) sense. Thus, the term “business” reveals the Christmas season as denoting the paradox within Dickens’ paradigm of Victorian conduct.

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In addition to his investigation of the contradictory (though overlapping) meanings of the word “business,” Dickens also explores the “secular” and “spiritual” binary of the term “good” in its industrial and moral connotations throughout the novel. Scrooge’s fixation on “active usefulness” and the “discharge of duty” (Appendix A.7 183) leads to his obsession with industry,
product and profit. He uses the term “good” to mean financial gain. For example, when Scrooge’s nephew Fred informs him that he does not “‘keep Christmas’” (Dickens 42), Scrooge responds, “‘Let me leave it alone, then ... Much good may it do you! Much good it has ever done you!’” (42). Scrooge interprets “good” to mean the material benefits of financial gain. Thus, Scrooge’s functional thinking is representative of industrial England’s extreme focus on “the spirit of active usefulness, [and] perseverance” (Appendix A.7 183) and its resulting materialism.

In contrast, Dickens presents Fred as the embodiment of the last of the virtues. Fred replies, “‘Christmas time, ... [is] a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; ... I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good and I say God Bless it!’” (Dickens 42-43). Fred uses “good” to denote spiritual benefit, satisfaction and Christian moral propriety. He expands on this notion when explaining to the guests at his dinner party that Scrooge’s “‘wealth is of no use to him. He don’t do any good with it. He don’t make himself comfortable with it. He hasn’t the satisfaction of thinking ... that he’s ever going to benefit Us with it’” (94). Fred once again uses “good” to signify the moral pleasure one can acquire by using material wealth to assist others. To do “good” is to display benevolence and compassion toward others, thereby demonstrating the Christmas spirit of Christian generosity. He illuminates the paradoxical nature of Victorian virtue by presenting the spiritual worth of industry as derived from the motives of “kindness and forbearance” (Appendix A.7 183). The Christmas season brings these two oppositional figures together to unveil the paradoxical tension between the first and last set of virtues within Dickens’ paradigm.

Scrooge’s use of the word “good” changes as he starts to embrace a more Christian morality. In claiming that Marley was “‘always a good man of business’” (Dickens 56), Scrooge appeals to Marley’s ability to benefit their financial trade. Marley later responds by using “good” in its moral context when he asserts that “‘this earth must pass into eternity before the good of which it is susceptible is all developed’” (55). Marley warns Scrooge that the personal amassing of wealth, or “good,” from constant human labour, causes an ignorance of the potential moral liberality, or “good,” that can come of its profit.
This warning captures the secular nature of “active usefulness” (Appendix A.7 183) when not used, in the spirit of Christianity, for social charity.

As Scrooge realizes the moral implications of his self-serving conduct, he shifts his use of the word “good.” He appeals to the last of the virtues by pleading for mercy from the third Ghost. He cries, “I fear you more than any spectre I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good ... Will you not speak to me?” (Dickens 102-103). Instead of denoting financial profit, Scrooge uses “good” to indicate the spiritual benefits of the Ghost’s lesson. He then observes the “ignorance and cruelty” (Kelly 15) of his former self as embodied by the woman who took his bed materials after death. Addressing the stolen fabric, she asserts that “If calico an’t good enough for such a purpose, it isn’t good enough for anything. It’s quite becoming to the body” (Dickens 109). Just as he has valued others based on the financial amount of their productivity, Scrooge himself becomes objectified and is valued by the monetary value his belongings yield. “Good” is used to implicate Scrooge as being only of financial worth to others.

“Good” further describes Scrooge’s moral worth to society after his transformation. The novel concludes, “He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew” (Dickens 123). The repetition of “good” not only enforces his growing attention to the last of the virtues, it also reveals the need for a progressive secular Victorian society to divert more attention to communal charity. The shifting use of “good” exposes the binary nature of Victorian virtue by presenting the spiritual benefits of material “active usefulness” as dependent on the amount of focus “kindness and forbearance” (Appendix A.7 183-184) receives. Thus, the double meanings of “good” unveil the dual attitudes of the Christmas season and the “secular” and “spiritual” components of Dickens’ model.

While the Christmas holiday might be thought of as revealing the paradox of “active usefulness” and “kindness and forbearance” (Appendix A.7 183-184), Dickens endorses a Christian charity that can, and should, be demonstrated even within a commercial context.
the contexts of “business” and “good” complicate this paradox by capturing the secularization of Christmas. Dickens advocates a Christian charity that can, and should, be demonstrated even within a commercial context. Moral goodness and material gain are not separable: personal productivity provides the opportunity to do good for others. Commercial gain is not to be collected and kept only for personal corporeal pleasures. Appealing to the worldly “pleasures of the hearth: abundant food and drink, dancing and merry games” (Kelly 9), Dickens writes that “the great effect of the evening” at Fezziwig’s annual Christmas ball “came after the Roast and Boiled, when the fiddler (an artful dog, mind! The sort of man who knew his business better than you or I could have told it him!) struck up ‘Sir Roger de Coverly’” (Dickens 70). The fiddler’s trade, or “business,” is commodified and consumed as a part of the secular atmosphere of the gathering. Likewise, Dickens writes that “the French plums blushed in modest tartness from their highly decorated boxes, or that everything was good to eat and in its Christmas dress” (83). The food, once commercially ornamented for the season, is rendered “good,” or worthy of eating.

Nevertheless, the circumstances surrounding “business” and “good” address the spirit of Christianity, and the paradox of Dickens’ model. For example, the third Ghost “conveyed him [Scrooge], as before ... into the resorts of business men ... It was an office still, but not his” (Dickens 114). Scrooge’s former concentration on the material production of his trade had caused him to incarcerate himself within his office. His surprise at not having possession of his office in the future recalls Marley’s earlier warning: “‘Not to know that any Christian spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast means of usefulness’” (55). Marley unveils moral ignorance as resulting from a complete focus on the secular meaning of “usefulness” as opposed to Christian “usefulness” (generosity).

Likewise, Bob Cratchit addresses the tension between material utility and moral industry when explicating that Tiny Tim behaved “‘as good as gold ... and better’” because he had hoped that people in church would be reminded of God in seeing his crippled state (87). Capturing the “secular” and “spiritual” binary of the model, Bob presents spiritual understating as a form of moral wealth. He places pious affluence at a higher value than the financial benefits of material wealth. Thus, the terms “business” and “good” illuminate Christian morals
alongside the paradox of industry and morality within Dickens’ paradigm of Victorian virtue. Dickens reveals that moral worth is derived from the uses of material industry, therefore advocating the symbiotic connection between moral utility and economic productivity.

The Christmas season within Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* highlights the paradox of individual production and communal generosity in his model of Victorian conduct. The contexts of “business” and “good” each capture the tension between the “secular” and “spiritual” counterparts of the paradigm. Scrooge forfeits his identity when dealing with new personnel in his business. His trade is, paradoxically, a means of financial production and an opportunity to demonstrate kindness. Peter Cratchit also becomes socially withdrawn from his family Christmas dinner upon learning that he will be inheriting financial “business.” The topic of employment then becomes the subject of family conversation and, ironically, a means of promoting solidarity. Scrooge’s unwillingness to involve himself in the “business” (concerns) of the poor, due to the amount of time consumed by his “business” (trade), is contrasted against Marley’s paradoxical suggestion that one’s “business” (concern and trade) should involve the welfare of others.

Moreover, the shifting uses of “good,” in terms of economic and moral benefit, reveal the binary of production and spirituality within the model. Scrooge, believing Christmas to be of no financial advantage, is opposed by his nephew’s conviction that the holiday is beneficial to the soul. Scrooge’s use of “good” changes as he undergoes a moral conversion. His assertion that Marley is a “good” (skilled, profitable) man of trade is contrasted against his later declaration that the third Ghost is present to do “good” to his spirit. In witnessing that his value to society has been measured by the monetary amount his property yields, he recognizes the moral dangers of ignorance. The concluding repetition of “good” when describing Scrooge’s changed character reinforces his newfound spirituality.

*A Christmas Carol* constructs Victorian Christmas as encompassing both a utilitarian and spiritual approach to proper Victorian conduct. Dickens’ tale is a “cautionary note about human behaviour” (Kelly 27) that demonstrates the moral ignorance that results from a complete focus on production. Scrooge’s moral transformation conveys the moral that it is ethically good to use one’s
industry as a means of providing social charity. The Christmas holiday marks Dickens’ redefinition of Victorian virtue: it is spiritually important to labour in one’s commercial business for the purposes of benefiting the welfare of others on earth. Engaging in acts of charity is a form of self-conduct that God desires for all of humanity. Reflecting this definition, Dickens echoes Tiny Tim’s declaration “God Bless Us, Every One!” at the end of the novel (125). Dickens emphasizes the notion that everyone must participate in giving generously through their industry. It is the responsibility of all to be productive for the purposes of helping one another in the spirit of goodness. The pleasure of compassion is realized when one makes it their moral business to use the goodness of financial prosperity to perform ethically good deeds for others. A balance of attention to industry and moral generosity results in excellence of conduct. The Christmas season serves as a reminder to observe Dickens’ model in its entirety.

WORKS CITED


