

TEMPLETON REPORT

NEWS FROM THE JOHN TEMPLETON FOUNDATION

November 25, 2008

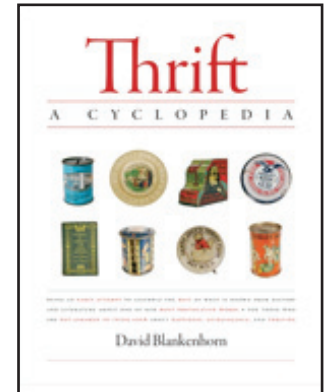
Whatever Happened to Thrift?

Writing recently in *Newsweek*, columnist Daniel Gross observed that “thrift, like the repossession business, is one of those classic countercyclical industries.” When the economy starts shrinking, Americans “start saving and investing rather than borrowing and splurging.” But that is not how Sir John Templeton wanted people to think about thrift, according to JTF Executive Vice President Arthur Schwartz. “He wanted it to be something like honesty, part of who you are and the way you want to be.”

In 2003, Schwartz approached David Blankenhorn and his colleagues at the Institute for American Values in New York with the idea of putting together a major initiative on thrift. Over the past five years, with the support of a \$1.2 million grant from Templeton, the Institute has completed several projects related to thrift as both a contemporary social and cultural need and an American virtue of long standing.

The first of these projects, a report entitled *For A New Thrift*, was released this past spring and signed by scholars and public figures from across the political spectrum. Targeted at policy-makers, the report examines America’s current “debt culture” and explains how a “thrift ethic” can serve the aims of social reform. It points in particular to policies that might curb the most destructive practices of payday lenders, state lotteries, and the credit-card and gaming industries.

Another part of the initiative is Blankenhorn’s new book, *Thrift: A Cyclopedia*. With hundreds of quotes, sayings, proverbs, and photos of thrift memorabilia, the collection provides insights on the subject from such varied sources as the Bible, the Qur’an, Shakespeare, Karl Marx, Oscar Wilde, J.C. Penney, and Warren Buffet. As Blankenhorn writes in his introduction, the “whole concept sounds quaintly old-fashioned,” but thrift “has helped to create some of our most vital social institutions and to fuel some of our most inspiring social movements.” A second, forthcoming book, titled *Franklin’s Thrift* (May 2009), contains essays by a number of scholars exploring the origins of the American idea of thrift. Both books are published by the Templeton Foundation Press.



Video: Templeton Book Forum

At a recent Templeton Book Forum event in New York City, Blankenhorn explained that thrift does not mean being miserly or cheap. Rather, it concerns “the ethics and practice of wise use” and derives from the idea of “thriving.” Industry, frugality, and trusteeship—the components of thrift—can be thought of, he suggested, as the secular counterpart to the religious principle of “stewardship.” (For video of the event, moderated by Daniel Gross and including Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, the lead author of *For A New Thrift*, visit http://www.templeton.org/video/blankenhorn_whitehead/1.html.)

With the economic turmoil of the past year, Blankenhorn and his colleagues have found an increasingly receptive audience for their ideas about thrift, especially in the media. David Brooks of the *New York Times* devoted a column to *For A New Thrift*, calling it “one of the most important think-tank reports you’ll read this year,” and followed up with another piece about the need to establish new social “norms” with respect to personal debt. Coverage has included the *Financial Times*, *Newsweek*, and the *Washington Post*, and Blankenhorn and Whitehead themselves have written widely on the subject. As they concluded in a joint op-ed for the *New York Daily News*, “Thrift is not just a medicine for when we are sick. It’s a practical strategy for the good life.”

NOTEBOOK

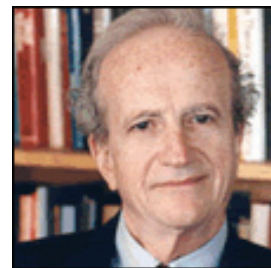
JTF Awarded the National Humanities Meda



On November 17, the John Templeton Foundation was awarded the National Humanities Medal in a ceremony at the White House. The citation praised the Foundation “for opening new frontiers in the pursuit of answers to mankind’s oldest questions.” Dr. John M. Templeton, Jr. accepted on behalf of JTF. Established in 1997, the National Humanities Medal honors “individuals or groups whose work has deepened the nation’s understanding of the humanities, broadened our citizens’ engagement with the humanities, or helped preserve and expand Americans’ access to important resources in the humanities.”

Becker and Posner on Markets and Morals

The John Templeton Foundation’s most recent Big Questions advertorial has continued to provoke discussion among public intellectuals. Gary Becker, a Nobel-prize winning economist from the University of Chicago and Judge Richard Posner of the U.S. 7th Circuit Court of Appeals, have used their joint blog to publish their own responses to the question: “Does the free market corrode moral character?”



Gary Becker



Richard Posner

Becker writes, “If the question had been put to me, I would have first discussed whether corrupt and dishonest businessmen make greater profits than honest and morally admirable businessmen.” Is more government regulation necessary to prevent scandal and corruption in the economy? Becker doesn’t think so. “This [solution] presumes that regulators and government officials act with sufficient knowledge about the industries involved, and with great wisdom and morality. Unfortunately, often that is not the case.”

Posner, on the other hand, seems to have less faith in the ability of the market to encourage moral behavior. “Although commercial society selects for and encourages traits that we are apt to think ‘good,’ such as cooperativeness, intelligence, and empathy,” he writes, “in fact these qualities are morally neutral. Intelligent and cooperative businessmen, whose empathetic qualities enable them to manipulate consumers’ emotions and intellectual limits, will be prone to collude with their competitors and defraud their customers, as well as to ignore pollution and other externalities that economic activity produces.”

Philosophy of the Airwaves

Are people genuinely altruistic or is altruism just a type of selfish behavior?

What is the relationship between the mind and the brain? If God is perfect—

all-knowing, all-powerful, and beneficent—why do bad things happen? These

are just a few of the questions being asked each week on “Philosophy Talk” radio. With a \$122,000 grant from the Templeton

Foundation, two Stanford University philosophy professors, John Perry and Ken Taylor, have been exploring such topics for a

broad audience on a one-hour weekly radio program.



With guests from a range of academic fields, the hosts use a down-to-earth, no-nonsense approach to bring the richness of philosophic thought to everyday subjects. JTF program officer Andrew Rick-Miller jokes that the duo explores deep philosophical questions with a “Car Talk” sensibility. The show is broadcast on almost 40 radio stations, mostly located on the West coast, and the “Philosophy Talk” podcast is also gaining in popularity. Past programs can be found at <http://www.philosophytalk.org/notesPastShows.htm>.

For more information, write to communications@templeton.org.

JOHN TEMPLETON FOUNDATION

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