

## The Gospel of Wealth (1889)

Andrew Carnegie

Andrew Carnegie immigrated to the United States from Scotland when he was a teenager. Beginning as a telegram messenger boy, he rose in U.S. business ranks to become a railroad owner and then a steel magnate. The Carnegie Steel Corporation made him hundreds of millions of dollars.

Carnegie believed that industry and technology would make the world a better place for everyone. He also believed that, as a wealthy industrialist, he should help to realize this vision. By the time he died in 1919, he had given away about 90 percent of his half-billion dollar fortune. He endowed 21 organizations, among which were Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh and Carnegie Hall in New York City. He also provided the money to build 2,500 public libraries across the country.

To some extent, Carnegie believed in *Social Darwinism*. Social Darwinists applied Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection in the animal and plant world to human society. According to the proponents of this theory, successful people, like the "fit" animals that Darwin wrote about, were more likely to survive than unsuccessful people. Social Darwinists pointed out that successful people tend to be rich, productive, and clever. Therefore, they claimed, free competition between the fit and the unfit would eventually lead to the development of a society consisting of superior people.

Although Carnegie was a Social Darwinist, his views on philanthropy differed from those of other Social Darwinists. Some thinkers, such as William Graham Sumner, felt that there should be no government aid for the poor and that reforms to help the weak only hindered progress to a better society. Carnegie, however, was a staunch believer in philanthropy. In this excerpt from an essay, "Wealth," that he wrote in 1889 for the *North American Review*, Carnegie explains how charity can be used to promote the evolution toward a world of peace and plenty.

This, then, is held to be the duty of the man of wealth: first, to set an example of modest, unostentatious [not showy] living, shunning display or extravagance; to provide moderately for the legitimate wants of those dependent upon him; and after doing so to consider all surplus revenues which come to him simply as trust funds, which he is called upon to administer, and strictly bound as a matter of duty to administer in the manner which, in his judgment, is best calculated to produce the most beneficial results for the community—the man of wealth thus becoming the mere agent and trustee for his poorer brethren, bringing to their service his superior wisdom, experience, and ability to administer, doing for them better than they would or could do for themselves. . . .

In bestowing [giving] charity, the main consideration should be to help those who will help themselves; to provide part of the means by which those who desire to improve may do so; to give those who desire to rise the aids by which they may rise; to assist but rarely or never to do all. Neither the individual nor the race is improved by almsgiving [handouts]. Those worthy of assistance, except in rare cases, seldom require assistance. The really valuable men of the race never do, except in cases of accident or sudden change. Everyone has, of course, cases of individuals brought to his own knowledge where temporary assistance can do genuine good, and these he will not overlook.

But the amount which can be wisely given by the individual for individuals is necessarily limited by his lack of knowledge of the circumstances connected with each. He is the only true reformer who is as careful and as anxious not to aid the unworthy as he is to aid the worthy, . . . for in almsgiving more injury is probably done by rewarding vice than by relieving virtue. . . .

The man who dies leaving behind him millions of available wealth, which was his to administer during life, will pass away “unwept, unhonored, and unsung,” no matter to what uses he leaves the dross [rubbish] which he cannot take with him. Of such as these the public verdict will then be: “The man who dies thus rich dies disgraced.”

Such, in my opinion, is the true Gospel concerning Wealth, obedience to which is destined some day to solve the problem of the Rich and the Poor, and to bring “Peace on earth, among men good will.”

## Review Questions

1. Describe the theory of "Social Darwinism."
2. Which of the Carnegie's beliefs on philanthropy differed from those of William Graham Sumner?
3. (a) What did Andrew Carnegie mean when he referred to "surplus revenues"? (b) How did Carnegie suggest that the surplus revenues of the rich be utilized?
4. Why did Andrew Carnegie write that "He is the only true reformer who is as careful and as anxious not to aid the unworthy as he is to aid the worthy"?
5. Why did Carnegie feel that "the man who dies thus rich dies disgraced"?
6. *How do you think that Carnegie would feel about the modern U.S. welfare system if he were still living?*