# Why Bother Going to Work? Greed, Philanthropy, and Leisure

In Oliver’s Stone 1987 film *Wall Street,* Gordon Gecko famously claims that “greed is good” both for society and for the individual business person. Is he right? The events of the film suggests that he isn’t, but Gecko’s basic idea is one with a long history. In nearly every time and place (even before the advent of modern capitalism), there have been those who have argued that individual ambition and self-interest should be encouraged, on the grounds that it helps drive progress. On the other hand, there have been those who argue that there (natural) human impulses are often harmful, not only to society but even to the greedy people themselves. In this lecture, we’ll take a look at this debate. Again, while its unlikely we’ll be able to come to a single, definitive to this complex issue, there is considerable value in examining our beliefs about these issues, and in considering how they fit with both our other beliefs and with our *actions.* For many of us, it is all too easy to excuse our own (sometimes selfish actions), while simultaneously condemning those others. Similarly, while we may recognize in the abstract that “life isn’t all about stuff,” it is often difficult to keep this in mind when it actually comes to making decisions in particular cases.

## Carnegie and the “Gospel of Wealth”

**Andrew Carnegie** (1835-1919) was born to a family of weavers in Scotland. His family moved to the U.S., and Carnegie started working in a factory at age 13. He worked his way up to become one of the most successful businessmen in history, and founded U.S. Steel. He is now known as a **philanthropist** who gave large amounts of money to science, the arts, education, and many other things. Among other things, he founded Carnegie Mellon University and the Carnegie Foundation (which helped start *Sesame Street*, among other things).

Carnegie’s “Gospel of Wealth” begins by recognizing that there were, as a matter fact, *huge* gulfs between the rich and the poor, with the richest people having hundreds or thousands times more wealth than the poorest people. However, Carnegie defends this inequality on the grounds that it is necessary for technological and social progress and that the accumulation of wealth can, in long run, lead to a better society for all. There are a few points of Carnegie’s argument worth noting, since these themes have been picked up by many authors over the years. I’ve also noted a few common criticisms (some from the political “left” and others from the political “right”).

1. **Most social and technological progress is driven by a select few.** Carnegie notes that living standards had risen *for everyone* since the beginning of capitalism. In many ways, the lifestyle of a working class or middle class person in late 19th century U.S. or U.K. was superior to that of an extremely rich person of a few hundred years before. Carnegie argues that this was made possible by the scientific and technological progress made by a relatively small number of people. The competitive nature of capitalist rewards most heavily rewards those (relatively few) people who invent new products or improve methods of production, but EVERYONE benefits from these advances. The basic idea here is that the inequality in wealth is a (more or less) accurate indication of *how productive a person is.*

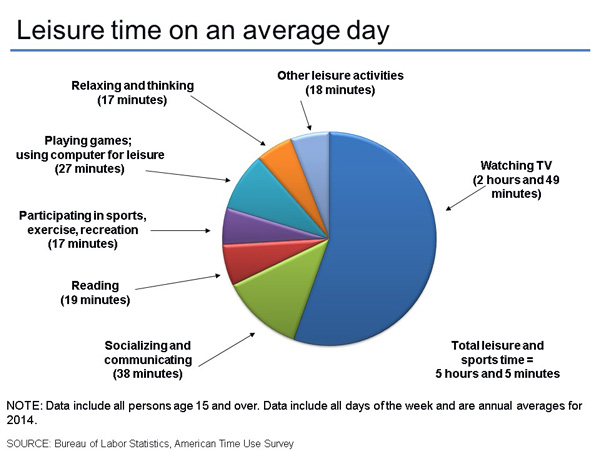
Figure 1 Andrew Carnegie.

* 1. **Criticism:** This underestimates the role of luck. Recent research suggests that successful people (like Carnegie) tend to overestimate their responsibility for their own success, while unsuccessful people tend to do the opposite, and underestimate their role in their own failures.

1. **Inequality is necessary to motivate people.** Carnegie opposes egalitarian theories like Anarchism, Socialism, or Communism on the grounds that they are theories for “angels” (who are motivated by helping others) and not for humans (who care about helping themselves, and those close to them). He argues that, if we want to see continued progress, we need to have a reward system that rewards hard work and innovation, and punishes laziness and/or lack of ability. Carnegie recognizes that this may lead to unfair or unjust outcomes for some, but thinks this is better than the alternative.
   1. **Criticism:** This may be a false dilemma. Even in the 19th century, there were plenty of thinkers who argued that government ought to help *reduce* inequality, even though they shouldn’t try to eliminate it. It’s not at all obvious that this would hurt motivation in the way that Communism would.
2. **Estate taxes are good, and can motivate the superrich to give back.** Carnegie was well aware of the class system that had historically plagued Britain, in which inherited wealth played a huge role, and was greatly opposed to people “stockpiling” money to pass onto their children. In its place, he argued that the government can (and should) tax rich people very heavily when they died. This would not only help fund the government, but would provide motivation for rich people to give charitably *before* they died (especially if they thought they had better ideas about how to spend the money than did the government). It would punish the superrich for their attempts to be greedy during their life.
   1. **Criticism:** For some people, the desire to leave a fortune to their heirs is a major motivation. Taking this away from them might decrease their motivation (and hence their productivity).
3. **Social spending should be targeted, and not simply give money to the poor.** Carnegie argued that charitable donations should aim to “help those who will help themselves; to provide part of the means by which those 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.” Carnegie’s basic idea was that charity needed to be directed toward helping those who were *already working toward their goals* to achieve them, and should not simply be given to people on the basis that they were poor. (Carnegie doesn’t try to make this an absolute principle, however, since he presumably recognizes that there are some people, such as those with very severe disabilities, who really can’t work).
   1. **Criticism:** Carnegie makes this sound way easier than it really is. Governments and aid organizations around the world have experimented with all sorts of ways to give aid that “motivates” recipients to work harder, and these programs have not always worked well. In recent, some economists (of various political persuasions) have argued it would be more cost-effective to simply give people money/benefits based on how poor they are (contrary to what Carnegie claims).

In modern terms, we might say that Carnegie is in favor of **equality of opportunity** but not **equality of outcome.** He is strongly opposed to the idea of those born into rich families getting a “head start” (hence, his idea that the government should get most of your money when you die), but he thinks that, after this, those who produce the most should get the most income. His general idea of a “duty of the rich to give back” has clearly influenced people like Bill and Melinda Gates, Warren Buffett, Mark Zuckerberg, and so on. (In fact, many of these people have explicitly said they will not leave large amounts of money to their children, and will instead spend it on charitable activities).

## Ciulla on Leisure and Consumption

**Working for Leisure v. Working for Consumption.** In a book called *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Working Life,* Joannae Ciulla argues that modern society encourages people to think that work can, more or less by itself, meet our needs for happiness, friendship, meaning, and so on. So, if you’re dissatisfied with your life, there’s a simple solution: You just need to work harder (and get a raise, a promotion, etc.)! She contrasts this with Aristotle’s idea that **leisure** (activities that we choose to do)is fundamental for human happiness, and that we ought to do work *in order to* have leisure. This contrasts with the way many people live now (and especially in places like the US and Japan, where people take muchless vacation than in European countries), where people choose to spend their free time working so that they can buy more things. That is, people are increasingly sacrificing *leisure* for *increased consumption.* Ciulla suggests that this is often a mistake.

**Why Do We Have Such Little Free Time?** While workers have slightly more free time than they did 40 or 50 years ago, they don’t have *that* much more free time. One might reasonably: Why is this? At least part of the answer seems to be that, historically, when given time off, workers tended to do things that were either genuinely harmful (drinking excessively, gambling, etc.) or that employers were opposed to (forming unions, political organizing, etc.). This has led to (some) powerful political forces to oppose increased free time. For example, many employers argued forcibly against ideas like the 40-work week, the weekend, etc. on the grounds that too much free time was *bad* (these arguments were often directed particularly against women or minorities). In recent decades, workers’ free time has increasingly been spent on TV, the internet, video games, etc. By contrast, much *less* time is spent on the sorts of “self-improvement” leisure activities Aristotle was thinking of: socializing, sports, music, reading, etc.

Figure 2 American's use of their free time (statistics from 2014).

**Does Work Really Make Us Better People? It Depends…** Ciulla is very wary of the idea that we should work *in order to* buy more things. In fact, she thinks that doing so can actually harm us in concrete ways. For example, consider teenagers whose parents tell them to “get a job” to buy the things they want: video games, cars, movie tickets, etc. She notes that some studies have found that teenagers with jobs actually do worse in important ways (more drug use, stress, etc.) than those who do not jobs. Moreover, because of the nature of these jobs (fast food, etc.) teens often acquire a negative attitude about the nature of work, and come to believe that it all amounts to meaningless busy work. Importantly, however these results do NOT hold for teens who are working for good *reason* such as supporting their families, saving for college, getting experience in their chosen career, etc. Ciulla’s point is not the “working while a teenager is bad idea”; rather, it’s that teens—like the rest of us—shouldn’t be working jobs merely so that they can buy more unneeded stuff. (It is important that there are many studies showing benefits to teenagers working, those these don’t necessarily contradict Ciulla’s intended point.)

## Integrity

Most people (again, sociopaths excluded) place some degree of value preserving their professional and personal integrity. We all want to think of ourselves as having a set of “principles” that we live by, both at work and in our private lives. Among other things, this sense of integrity requires that we don’t “break the rules we live by,” even when it would be convenient for us to do so. However, the notion of **integrity** is a bit tough to pin down: What exactly is it? And how do we go about making sure we have it? In her widely-cited article “Integrity,” Lynn McFall tries to answer these questions.

**Integrity Requires Coherence.** McFall begins by noting that integrity requires that our actions and beliefs are *coherent* with one another. She summarizes this requirement as follows: “Personal integrity requires that an agent (1) subscribe to some consistent set of principles or commitments and (2) in the face of temptations or challenge, (3) uphold these principles or commitments, (4) for what the agent takes to be the right reasons.” The basic idea here is that, along with having a consistent set of beliefs, we must try to *act* by them, even when things get “tough.”

**Integrity Requires Commitment to \*Important\* Principles.** McFall argues that not *every* set of principles is equal, at least when it comes to living with integrity. So, for example, where “treat others as I would like to be treated” or “do my best to help others” might be involved with a sense of integrity, principles like “always look out for number 1” or “do whatever is necessary to make people like me” do NOT seem like good candidates. McFall suggests this reveals something about the nature of integrity: while we all can recognize that people of integrity can disagree about fundamental principles, we DO require that these principles be the sort of thing a “reasonable person” might find important. So, for example, one need not be a vegetarian to think that this commitment (if undertaken for moral reasons) might involve a sort of integrity. By contrast, no one thinks that a commitment to “only drink Coke products, and never Pepsi” shows integrity.

**Defeasible v. Identity Conferring Commitments.** McFall notes that while most of us have multiple principles/goals that structure our lives, not every principle is equally important. Some of these (such as “I want to have a successful career”) are **defeasible commitments—**that is, while they are important, we recognize that (1) these might sometimes conflict with other, more important goals/commitments and (2) if we fail to achieve these goals, or abide by these principles, we can still lead worthwhile lives. By contrast, McFall’s “Olaf Principle” holds that integrity is much more closely related to unconditional, **identity-conferring commitments.** These might involve things like “I will be a good friend,” “I will live an honest life and not exploit people,” or “I will put my family’s interest above my own.” Failing to live up to *these* commitments means recognizing that “we are not the person we thought we were.” Our commitments to such principles are *fundamental,* and cannot be explained or justified in any more basic terms. So, for example, we don’t have these commitments “because they make us happy,” but rather because “they are part of who we are” as people.

## Review Questions

1. Given what you know about today’s society, do you agree with Carnegies’ proposals that (a) a high degree of inequality is necessary for a social progress, (b) the very rich should donate most wealth to charity (and this should be encouraged by high estate taxes), and (c) donations should aim at helping only those “who will help themselves”? Choose one or two of these, and offer an argument for or against it.
2. Ciulla claims that many of us end up “working in order to consume” instead of “working to enjoy our leisure time.” She also claims that this is generally a mistake. How accurately does this describe your experience as a worker?
3. Choose a historical figure, well-known celebrity or public figure, or fictional character that you find interesting (and that you know something about). To what extent does this person’s actions reveal a commitment to what McFall calls “integrity.” In your answer, be sure to work through the various parts of McFall’s account. (It’s not enough to list some neat things about the person and conclude “she or he is a really great person!”).

## For Further Reading

* Carnegie, Andrew. 1889. “Wealth.” *The North American Review*, 653–64.
* Ciulla, Joanne B. 2001. *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work*. New York: Crown Business.
* McFall, Lynne. 1987. “Integrity.” *Ethics* 98 (1): 5–20.