WAS ANDREW CARNEGIE GENEROUS?

Daniel Putman

Millions of Americans, as well as millions in Europe, have used or will use a library established by Andrew Carnegie. In his lifetime Carnegie gave the equivalent of several billion dollars in today's money to establish 1,689 public libraries in the United States, Hawaii and Puerto Rico. Moreover, 660 libraries in Britain and Ireland, 125 in Canada, 17 in New Zealand, 12 in South Africa and scattered others around the world exist because of this man.[1] And this does not include the extensive positive influence of the foundations and grants established by Carnegie. Aristotle would likely have called him 'magnificent'. Carnegie had the virtue beyond mere generosity available only to those with the means and position to benefit the polis on a grand scale. Unlike generosity, magnificence involves what Irwin has called 'the judgment and tact that are needed for large benefactions.[2] Whether 'magnificent' or 'generous' is a better term for Carnegie's character is not my major concern. Carnegie's recent biographer simply uses 'generous'. So, for the remainder of this paper, I will use 'generous'.[3] But was Carnegie, in fact, generous? This paper will explore both the definition of the virtue and its application to Andrew Carnegie.

Our first intuition is to consider the issue of Carnegie's generosity a ridiculous question. It is like asking whether a firefighter who enters a burning building to save a child is brave. But, as Aristotle points out, the issue is often not as clear as it appears.[4] Before discussing Carnegie it is worth considering two cases of apparent generosity, one where our intuition leans heavily toward affirming the virtue and one where we lean heavily against it. A working student with little money gives ten dollars a month and a day's time

doi:10.1017/S1477175610000163 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2010
Think 26, Vol. 9 (Autumn 2010)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000163 Published online by Cambridge University Press

each month to a local domestic abuse shelter. Moreover, the student acts this way on a regular basis. Assuming no hidden motives exist, the student is a generous person. Compare this to a death camp guard who obtains money and gold taken from Jewish inmates, part of the acquisition due to his own brutality toward them. But an orphanage in a nearby city has touched his heart. Even though he could personally benefit from the money, he gives the money and gold he gets from the inmates to the orphanage and does this on a regular basis. Both the domestic abuse shelter and the orphanage use the money effectively to care for those who need help. Nevertheless, our intuition in the latter case is that something makes the guard's actions not truly generous whereas the student's was. But why does this difference exist? Does the source of the money affect the virtue? With these examples in mind (and Carnegie waiting in the wings) I want to examine three options for interpreting what is usually called 'generosity'.

One option is that the guard is actually generous but the act is simply not praiseworthy. In this regard the key to generosity is the motivating trait above all else. Generosity is a character trait distinct from other virtues like courage, temperance or loyalty. Unless one assumes the 'unity of the virtues' thesis, it seems entirely realistic that an individual could have one or more virtues but not others. A highly unsocial, unempathetic often intemperate police officer may in the face of danger go way beyond expectations to save an innocent victim in peril. This act can be a genuine act of bravery and it may be consistent with a pattern in the officer's life. The officer is courageous but you would not expect many other virtues from her.[5] Since generosity is a distinct character trait, one could argue then that the guard was generous amidst an array of other vices. The problem is not the virtue he has; it is the virtues he lacks. This way of understanding the virtues can be applied across the board. Carnegie, despite his well-established lack of empathy for his workers' situation, was in fact a very generous person. He had the relevant trait. But we may not feel

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000163 Published online by Cambridge University Press

it praiseworthy the way we do for the poor student. After all, Carnegie had plenty of money left over and treated his workers like objects. Moreover, in the much more extreme case of the camp, the guard was 'generous' in the midst of pain and terror for which he was partially responsible. So the trait might be genuine but not praiseworthy for the guard. Carnegie's generosity would be less praiseworthy than was often presented in the press and popular media, but he was generous. The trait was genuine and the surrounding environment, though it affects our overall judgment, is actually an independent issue.

But doesn't context have something to do with defining the virtue itself? Consider temperance. The trait of being temperate is empty without application in the appropriate setting, what Aristotle called the right way, the right time, the right place, etc. So being temperate at the office Christmas party may be quite different from being temperate at your son's return from Iraq or at eating, all expenses paid, for the only time in your life at one of the best restaurants in New York. Certainly the goal of a virtue seems intimately linked to context. The courage of a Klansman standing up for prejudice and hatred against the dangers of federal troops may not be courage at all because it is the wrong place and time. Aristotle's right time, right place, and right way all assume an inextricable link of the virtue with the surrounding environment. The practical virtues may be distinct from each other but they are never distinct from the context. In this light the guard's 'generosity' is a sham virtue, carried out in an inhumane and cruel environment. The fact that this trait may be persistent does not in itself mean the guard is generous any more than the trait of being willing to face dangers implies courage. Rashness is a vice for Aristotle precisely because it is the same motivating trait as courage but applied in the wrong way, the wrong time or the wrong place.

On this view the virtues are defined not just by reference to a persistent trait but to a trait applied in a way that increases flourishing, a requirement that makes context

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000163 Published online by Cambridge University Press

critical. This allows utilitarian factors to enter into the definition of the virtue. If the context is such that human flourishing is decreased, the act itself done in the wrong place or time may become irrelevant because of the other factors involved and a persistent tendency to act in the wrong context turns the virtue into a vice. Rashness as the motivation to face danger applied consistently in the wrong context is an example. Though the guard's act may produce flourishing in the orphanage, the surrounding context out of which the means of generosity are obtained so distorts the act that 'generosity' cannot be used to define it. Persistence of such actions in this context does not make the resulting character trait a virtue. It functions as a vice that justifies for the guard further brutality. Thus, one has to weigh the context for Andrew Carnegie. Unquestionably, the acts themselves, and his persistent tendency to perform such acts, produced a great deal of good. But, given the equally large degree of suffering involved for so many people that made Carnegie so wealthy, perhaps the application of the trait in context makes the attribution of generosity a false one. Like rashness, Carnegie's acts may display a simulacrum of the virtue.

However, Aristotle himself sharply distinguishes generosity from justice and how resources are obtained. He separates right giving from right taking. 'Hence it is more proper to the generous person to give to the right people than to take from the right sources and not from the wrong sources' and '... it is more proper to do fine actions than not to do shameful ones'.[6] Thus, Carnegie was generous but shameful in the way he got much of his money. Aristotle's definition of 'shameful' is closely tied to justice. Those who avoid taking wrongly are praised for justice while those who take rightly are not much praised at all, apparently because justice is assumed in the taking and only those who avoid injustice in their acquisition deserve praise.[7] But even here for Aristotle those who do not avoid taking unjustly (i.e. they do it shamefully) can be generous

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000163 Published online by Cambridge University Press

since, for Aristotle, these two virtues are distinct. Shameful taking is different than generous giving. But I would argue that these two virtues cannot be separated.

I want to suggest a third option relevant to Carnegie's giving. It also is a contextual issue but relates necessarily to the meaning of generosity. One of the reasons we think highly of the student is because he has little money but nonetheless donates some of it to a worthy cause. I suggest the operative term is not 'little', which may affect our emotions, but 'has' and what that entails. One can be generous with money, time or affection. To consider the third factor as illustrative of my point, people who are said to be 'generous with their affection' are sometimes viewed as false or hypocritical. Why? I think it is because we know that genuine affection is, at least for most people, a highly limited commodity in one's life, usually reserved for spouses, children or other loved ones. To be affectionate to strangers is to have a simulacrum of genuine affection and we often think (justified or not) that someone generous with affection simply does not have that much to give; other motives such as a desire to appear affectionate to others must be behind the acts. Such individuals look like they are giving something which they actually do not have.

The same is true with time. Another factor that makes our student a paradigm of genuine generosity is that his time is his own but limited. He chooses to go beyond the norm and give some of that time to a noble cause. But a person can also be false or hypocritical regarding generosity of time. If a worker's time is contracted to someone else but that time is then used for 'generous' purposes in another endeavor, the fact that the time was not hers to begin with would cause us to question whether giving it away could be called generosity. A person who spent time she was expected to be on the job helping at the local school would be using 'the company's time' to do something else. One need not deal only with business-like contracts in this regard. Consider a simple expectation or verbal agreement. A parent agrees to spend the day

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000163 Published online by Cambridge University Press

watching the children but instead works at the homeless shelter. Since the time 'belonged' to the family, it was not his to give away, even to a good cause. Generosity entails necessarily that what is given is one's to give. This is not true in the above examples.

This issue points directly to our serious qualms about the guard's 'generosity'. The problem is not with his motivation toward the orphanage (though many non-generous factors may be involved there also) nor with the larger context except in one very specific way. What he gave away he did not own. Thus he was not generous at all since there is no way to justify his having what he gave away. *Contra* Aristotle, generosity necessarily entails justice as an assumption. Money obtained unjustly (shamefully) is not money owned. Since generosity entails giving what is one's own to a noble cause, the guard was not generous – period. Our student gives from what he actually owns. Our emotions may reach out because he has so little but the virtue exists not because of the small amount he has but because he goes beyond the norm in giving away what he has, both in time and money. The motivation to be generous may be especially strong in his case but the motivation would be irrelevant if it was someone else's money or time he was giving away.

This brings us back to Carnegie. Did he own what he gave away? He had a genuine motivation. His biographer talks about Carnegie's own problems obtaining books as a teenager and what reading meant to him.[8] Carnegie recognized the immense value of this resource and how difficult it was for people in small towns or remote areas to flourish without books. Even granting the positive press he sought and other egoistic issues, there is little reason to doubt that, much more than other wealthy men of his time, Carnegie used the money for a cause he thought was noble and which in fact was. Millions of people who could never afford to travel beyond the borders of their town were able to do so in imagination because of the books available to them in Carnegie's libraries.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000163 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Our opposite reaction to Carnegie usually stems from the conditions which he imposed on his workers and his response to his workers' needs, e.g. his specious rationalizations for continuing the 12-hour work day and his response to his workers' desperate needs such as those at Homestead.[9] But my argument is that these factors are important but ultimately not the essential one for the virtue of generosity. Did Carnegie actually own all the money he had? Lawfully, at that time, the answer is yes. Though not always the case, Carnegie consistently followed the laws which, prior to the Roosevelt/Wilson reforms, allowed individuals to amass vast amounts of personal wealth. But the legal issue is irrelevant to the virtue. Nazi laws may have allowed the guards to benefit from the inmates' possessions but the laws were unethical. Examples of justice trumping unjust laws abound in history. I have no argument here for the unity of the virtues; however, I would argue that generosity can never be separate from justice. The trait of generosity assumes just ownership. Without that as a foundation generosity does not exist because nothing of one's own is being given.

Justice trumps the law in Carnegie's case also. (This is what later worker reform laws recognized, even though the reformers all acknowledged the good that Carnegie did.) The actual reason he could become so wealthy was to take more than justice allowed him. Thus some significant portion of his wealth he did not actually own. His generosity is decreased by exactly that amount which he gave away which was not justifiably his to begin with. Where this line exists is, to put it mildly, a thorny and complex issue but its exact location is not central to my thesis in this paper. The conditions of his workers are both the result and the cause of his personal vast accumulation of wealth but it is not the conditions per se which denigrate his generosity but the money he obtained by the way he ran his companies. Utilitarians may well rejoice at the results of what Andrew Carnegie did and it is quite likely that the good he did over time outweighs what his workers had to experience. But

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000163 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Carnegie's 'generosity' is tempered not by his lack of genuine motivation, nor by his attitude toward workers, but by the very specific fact that much of what he gave away was not his to give.

Daniel Putman is Professor of Philosophy at University of Wisconsin, Fox Valley. dan.putman@uwc.edu

Notes

[1] David Nasaw, *Andrew Carnegie* (New york: The Penguin press, 2006), p. 607.

[2] Aristotle, *NichoMachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985), p. 325, Note to 1122a29.

[3] Nasaw, p. 78.

[4] Aristotle, 1116a16–1117a23.

[5] MacIntyre makes this point cogently when he says that, if a devoted Nazi were to be re-educated, one of the (possibly few) virtues that would not need re-education would be courage, i.e., the trait to avoid cowardice and intemperate rashness in the face of danger. Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, 2nd edition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 179–180.

[6] Aristotle, 1120a10–1120a13.

[7] Ibid. 1120a20–1120a22.

[8] Nasaw, pp. 42–43.

[9] Ibid. pp. 178, 261, 282, 452–461, 471–472.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000163 Published online by Cambridge University Press