



Niall Scott and Jonathan Seglow. *Altruism.* (Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2007)

by Guðmundur H. Frímansson

Altruism is a disarmingly simple concept to formulate but difficult to pin down exactly. Basically it is letting the interests of others determine our reasons for action. It is the opposite of egoism and if it is true that all human actions are governed by self-interested motives then altruism becomes impossible. In history various ethicists have argued for egoism as the only theory about human motives and presumably the same would apply to other species. Thomas Hobbes most famously argued for such a theory of egoism and used it to justify his description of the state of nature as a war of every man against every man as he presents it in his *Leviathan*. The awe of power is necessary to establish civil society in Hobbes theory. But whatever the organization of society altruism is not possible in Hobbes way of seeing the world. Even the Golden Rule is understood as reciprocal self-interest rather than a call to altruism, to let the well-being and the interests of others dictate what you do.

I think it may be fairly said that egoism may be a realistic view of human motivation. It is more often than we want to believe that self-interest determines our motives. This may be fine in theory but in real life it is different. Both in private life and public this is often taken to be a symptom of weakness, even vice. In public life the common good should be the criterion of commendable decisions and projects and when it is not it is generally viewed as a fault in the decisions or projects. A person in a position of public trust is in for a tough time if she does not understand that the common good should be her aim, not her own interest. A parent who does not attend his child's needs and only serves his own willfully neglects his duties. Altruism seems to be fundamental to actual human ethical thought.

Most people want to believe that they can be altruistic and even that they are, sometimes. This is probably due to our experience of ourselves and those we know rather than to our vanity. Of course we want to think well of ourselves and of our fellows. Our experience of the pull and push of ethical and self-interested reasons in our daily lives indicates that we are morally complex beings who both want and can decide and act morally and altruism is a typical moral requirement. It seems that if we start thinking of ourselves as purely driven by self-interest we become less human, we lose something valuable in our ideas of ourselves, our reasoning and our conduct. So even if egoism is a powerful doctrine about human motivation it does not quite fit our moral experience.

This book is an introductory text about altruism as it has been discussed and researched in ethics, biology, social psychology and economics. In many ways it is an exemplary book, clearly articulated, covering the subject very well in about 150 pages. This is no mean feat. Everyone who is acquainted with some of the material can indicate some point of substance that might or should have been covered better. But



this is a well-balanced text, well argued, and it sticks to the most important issues. Some of the distinctions made in the book are important. I want to mention just two that can have wide ranging implications. The first is between altruism as applied to animals on the one hand and altruism as applied to humans. In the book it is discussed as altruism applied to behaviour and altruism applied to behaviour and motivation. This is important because altruism among animals cannot be altruism in the full sense as applied to humans because it requires cognitive skills that are beyond practically all other animals but humans. If this is correct then all attempts at explaining human altruism by reference to animal altruism will be incomplete, however interesting the evolutionary research is. The second is between altruism as reciprocity and altruism as ones action being determined by anothers interests. The problem with the notion of reciprocity is that the more it is expected the less we are inclined to think of it as altruism. If you give someone a gift, as is discussed in the book pp. 94-98, expecting a similar gift in return we are not willing to think of this relation as altruistic even though it is reciprocal. This is not to denigrate the relation of reciprocity, it certainly is of fundamental importance in human societies, but just to point out that it is different from altruism.

Other ideas are carefully discussed in this book that are very important in understanding altruism such as the role of sentiment and reason in forming altruistic motives. This book is one of the best starting places for anyone interested in altruism.

Guðmundur Heiðar Frímansson is a professor of philosophy at the University of Akureyri. He has worked at the University since 1992 chairing the Faculty of Education for fourteen years. He finished his PhD at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. His main interests are moral and political philosophy and philosophy of education. He has written on civic education and Kant's moral theory among other things and translated Kant's *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* into Icelandic.