The Altruistic Species
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SCIENTIFIC, PHILOSOPHICAL, AND RELIGIOUS
PERSPECTIVES OF HUMAN BENEVOLENCE

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Preface

At California State University, Chico, we have a fine tradition of offering to our honors students upper-division general education courses that, in addition to being exceptionally rigorous, are distinctive in that they are explicitly interdisciplinary and often team-taught. One of these courses was conceived through discussions between the two of us, one a psychologist and the other an ethicist, devoted respectively to understanding the way we are and elucidating the way we ought to be. At the intersection of our interests, we found the phenomenon of altruism. We immediately recognized that altruism could provide the basis for a stimulating interdisciplinary course. We certainly did not imagine at the time just how inspiring the course would turn out to be, for both our students and ourselves. The inspiration arises, in part, from the collision of different disciplinary approaches and the synergistic formation of new perspectives that emerge from that collision. This book is our attempt to impart the outlook we have gained through teaching this course.

Altruism is interesting to psychologists because its existence—if, that is, it really does exist—challenges certain long-held beliefs about human nature and the motives underlying our behavior. To ask “Does altruism really exist?” is to ask something important about our very nature as human beings. Many have assumed that true altruism does not exist, that what seems on the surface to be other-regarding in fact always reflects an underlying self-interested motive (a position called psychological egoism). Is it really our nature to be selfish? If so, can we overcome that essence of our being and become selfless in spite of ourselves? How? Or is selflessness already part of human nature? And if so, how prominent a feature of our psychology is it? Is it merely vestigial or incipient, requiring great energy or unusual circumstances to harness? Is it a rare characteristic possessed only by a remarkable few? Or is it ubiquitous in our species?

The possibility of altruism is intrinsically interesting to ethicists because
it presses us to reflect on the core of all moral consideration: the issue of how we treat others. The long history of the field of ethics has been governed until only very recently by an approach that seeks to specify the conditions under which the self is free to pursue its own aims and interests. That is, ethics is traditionally associated in our society with the preservation of liberties and the avoidance of wrongdoing, altruism representing a happy exception to the rule, but not part of the “rules” society must obey in order to remain civil and intact. What if this model turned out not to be appropriate for the sorts of beings we are because it misjudged our inherent connectedness to one another, or at least overstated the dichotomy between self-regard and other-regard? Ethics would then proceed from proactive rather than reactive premises. Helping others would take center stage, and what we should do would become a greater moral concern for us than what we should not do. In turn, altruism would become the paradigmatic moral event, justified not because of a reclarification of what our duties to others are, but because it would in this case become tantamount to human flourishing. Ethics is not studied in a vacuum. The insights it provides are at best thin if divulged from the aloof vantage point of “armchair philosophy.” Ethicists must listen to biological and social scientists, whose research importantly bears on properly understanding their subject: human beings. It follows that as we learn more about ourselves, it is ethically honest to adjust our moral expectations accordingly.

One of our purposes in writing this book is to provide readers with multiple entry points into the academic debates concerning altruism. (Different chapters introduce different disciplinary perspectives, ranging from biology and psychology to philosophy and religion.) At the same time, however, we have attempted to sew a single thread through the material, tying together disparate perspectives and their respective methods into a coherent whole. In so doing, we not only review much of the literature from these various disciplines but also attempt to synthesize it in a way that is our own, arriving, in the process, at some basic conclusions. Among these: (1) Altruism exists. It is not merely an illusion that reveals itself, upon close examination, to be disguised self-interest. (2) Altruism is, however, compatible with some forms of self-interested motivation. (3) Altruism is, to a degree at least, explicable. However, no single disciplinary perspective has the market cornered when it comes to explaining altruism and drawing out its implications. We suggest here that the best understanding is arrived at through making connections across the disciplines. (4) Altruism is a capacity that can be nourished through various means that human beings have at their disposal.
We are not born altruistic and we do not divide into “altruists” and “non-altruists.” More likely, each of us falls somewhere on a spectrum, although we have the capacity to move within this spectrum in one direction or another. Our nature determines the spectrum’s range, while where we, individually, are to be found on it depends on the various ways in which nature is nurtured in our own case. What this means is that how altruistic human beings will be, in contrast to the rest of the animal kingdom, is largely within their control. This presents a challenge both to the psychologist and to the ethicist. As human beings, we distinctively have the ability to adjust our normative expectations and (consequently) our conduct in light of who we discover ourselves to be. In this book, we address this challenge by simultaneously suggesting a more psychologically realistic and a more morally demanding approach to ethics than the one to which our society has become accustomed, one that places the phenomenon of altruism right in the center of the fields of psychology and ethics.

No comprehensive scholarly work of this nature sees the light of day without the selfless critical input of others. We would like to call particular attention to Stephen Post, who graciously discussed our project with us from its inception to its completion and consistently urged us to head in more fruitful directions. The seeds for many of the organizational and substantive decisions we made were planted during a conference that took place at Claremont School of Theology in April of 2005, organized by Stephen Post and Thomas Oord. In addition to these two, we would like thank Craig Boyd, Stephen Pope, Shelley Kilpatrick, Thomas Phillips, Wolfgang Achtner, Kevin Reimer, Nancy Howell, Ron Wright, James Smith, F. LeRon Shults, Patricia Bruininks, Jay McDaniel, Jeffrey Schloss, Warren Brown, and John Cobb for enriching our outlook by offering their unique perspectives during the discussions that took place at that conference. Letha Dunn read the entire manuscript at the last minute and alerted us to remaining ambiguities and areas that warranted further emphasis. For providing perpetual intellectual stimulation and eager engagement with our topic we would also like to thank Jock Reeder, Stephen Pope, Robert Burton, Daniel Veidlinger, Bruce Grelle, Joel Zimbelman, Eddie Vela, Margaret Bierly, Andy Bane, Paul Villegas, Joel Minden, Amy Quarré, Shawna Brewer, and Jeff Steinberg. For providing us with financial assistance during the formative stages of this project, we are grateful to the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love, and particularly its director, Stephen Post.

The impetus for writing this book, our course (“What Motivates Altruism?”), could not have happened without the support of our colleagues.
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