# **Kropotkin as Mother**

Mitchell Verter

*“Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings*[[1]](#footnote-1)*”*

Let us begin this remembrance of the centenary of Kropotkin’s death with the testimony that his old friend Errico Malatesta delivered a decade after his passing. Before Malatesta could enunciate any critique or commentary on Kropotkin’s thinking, he was first compelled to recollect his comrade’s fundamental generosity, stating: “I remember the small attentions, I would call maternal, which he bestowed on me when one night in London, having been the victim of an accident, I went and knocked on his door.[[2]](#footnote-2)” What might be meant by this passing reference to Kropotkin’s “maternal attentions”? In what way could we consider Kropotkin to be not just one of the forefathers of contemporary anarchism but also as someone whose conception of anarcho-communism already expresses what various feminist thinkers describe as “maternal practice”?

Before we even embark upon this investigation, we should first consider what an “attention” is. An “attention” is not yet the free initiative of a sovereign will but already something that partakes of both activity and receptivity, an activity motivated by the passivity of one’s awareness, an activity that is a reactivity: I can direct my attention only because something or someone has already made a demand upon it. Kropotkin’s anarcho-communism differs from both liberal political theory and from other varieties of anarchism because/as it draws our attention to the ways in which we are always constitutionally dependent upon others. Previous to the assertion of a free and autonomous will that would form mutual agreements with other free and autonomous wills, we already find ourselves needing other people and being responsible for the needs of others. In this paper, I will first consider various feminist discussions about how such dependencies and obligations structure our lives, and then consider how these non-voluntary relationships direct the voluntary associations formed within anarcho-communist society.

That each of us is born of a mother seems too obvious to contemplate, yet this fact is almost purposefully overlooked in the early modern conception of the individual. Thomas Hobbes exemplifies this neglect by inviting his reader to “return again to the state of nature and consider men as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly (like mushrooms) come to full maturity without all engagement to each other.[[3]](#footnote-3)” Hobbes’s imagination of man as a mushroom indicates several correlated denials regarding the human genesis of birth. Most prominently, it positions the modern political subject as spontaneously generated, unconditioned by any previous debt or organic connection.

Created from nothingness, this individual relates to nature not as a something living but rather as what is already dead; not through birth but through a metabolism that feeds off the decay of rotting raw material. In the mechanism propounded by Hobbes, human existence arises through the interplay of lifeless and inhuman forces colliding against each other, giving rise to both physical activity and human consciousness. In this conception, the human being becomes defined as the expression of material wills-to-power that drive the individual to strive ceaselessly to expand its [their?] own power and glory.

Once in society, this voluntary self-assertion finds itself in competition against other wills -- a struggle that, left in its natural state, culminates in a war of all against all. Given the primacy of the death-driven will, Hobbes can conceive of only one solution for this quandary: motivated by its fear of death, the political subject contracts voluntary agreements with others to curb its individual violence by submitting itself to the collective violence of domination by the State.

When we turn to feminist considerations on the nature of birth, we can distinguish a process of temporal becoming distinct from the impersonality of a mechanism that produces life from the metabolic decay of death. Alongside the collision of anonymous material forces that displace each other to establish the dominance of their position, pregnancy demonstrates how two persons can share the same material substance. As Trish Glazebrook explains, pregnancy provides a biological counterexample to Aristotle’s physical observation that two bodies cannot occupy the same place at the same time. “Pregnancy is a rounding logic of self into other … the presence of one in the self. The womb … is the first place with which the body finds itself co-structuring.[[4]](#footnote-4)”

Glazebrook encourages us to consider this birthing relationship not as a singular event but rather as something that structures our every moment of becoming through time, which she refers to as an “arche”, a governing principle that determines the mode in which our lives unfold through time.

Rather than endorsing a first principle of governance and domination, we will instead consider the phenomenon of maternity as an “anarchy”, in the sense employed by the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, to indicate a past so irreducibly previous to the present that it can never provide the basis for any origin or ground. It is an anarchy so disruptive that it irrevocably disturbs any attempt to posit one’s own individual self as an unconditioned first principle.

Before the emergence of each moment, the materiality of my body is already dependent on the materiality of other bodies. Levinas explains, “Sensible experience is an obsession by the other, or a maternity … I am bound to others before being tied to my own body.[[5]](#footnote-5)” His discussion of “maternity” emerges alongside his description of two related conceptions of shared materiality, eating and breathing. Through eating, one metabolically incorporates what is outside oneself into one’s own body, sustaining one’s own life with commodities alienated from the past lives of others who labored to produce them.

Conversely, breathing is an involuntary process in which we are invaded by and exposed to the outside, constituting the substance of my body in the present with the air that had constituted the substance of other bodies of other beings in the past and will constitute the substance of others in the future. A proper understanding of our own bodily existence demonstrates how we have been birthed from other bodies, how the material of our lives is already indebted to the material of other lives even before we are born. Before we even begin to assert ourselves as independent sovereign wills, we are already dependent upon others.

Dependency is felt most profoundly during periods of acute vulnerability such as old age, injury or sickness and is experienced more profoundly by those whose capacities are limited by physical or psychological disabilities. Yet throughout one’s life, one’s existence is always dependent upon the existence of others; nobody is ever entirely self-sufficient. The interdependence that binds our lives together is rooted in the myriad ways in which we depend upon each other. The fact that we all depend upon each other disrupts the idea that we appear on the political stage as an association of equals, each of us asserting our own wills to promote our own projects and to exert our domination over others.

Prior to our establishment as autonomous selves, we already required that other people have provided allowances and accommodations for us; prior to the self-assertion of our wills, we already found ourselves bound ethically by obligations. As Eva Kittay points out, we exist in nested sets of relationships, locating us in networks where we find ourselves both obligated to care for others and deserving of care from others.[[6]](#footnote-6) The way that care is distributed and organized is a central question for our conception of political relationships.

Just as being dependent on another person renders one vulnerable to that person’s neglect or abuse, having the responsibility to take care of another person exposes the care worker both to that person’s arbitrary will and to an economic system that devalues care labor, that barely recognizes the domestic work performed by female heads of households and that exploits mostly non-white women in precarious, poorly-paid jobs as maids, nurses’ aides and home health aides, and so on. As Eva Kittay urges, we must develop a society that places ultimate value on the recognition of human dependency and provides for both human dependents and those who perform dependency work.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Sara Ruddick’s analysis of maternal practice provides a paradigmatic example of dependency work. Ruddick defines the maternal standpoint not as an instinctive disposition or a specifically gendered role but rather as a set of practices that enact preservative love, nurturance, and training that preserves the life of the child, nourishes their growth and prepares them for acceptance in the wider society. Given that human infants do not have the physical or mental capacity for self-sufficiency for an extended period of time, the maternal practice that preserves human life is essential for both individual and collective survival. Maternal practices begin with being aware of these needs as demands and committing oneself to the work that satisfies them. “To be committed to meeting children’s demands for preservation does not require enthusiasm or even love; it simply means to see vulnerability and to respond to it with care rather than abuse, indifference, or flight.[[8]](#footnote-8)”

By attending to these needs as *demands*, maternal practice recognizes a mode of being obligated to other people in a way that is prior to voluntary freedom, an ethical claim that invests autonomy with responsibility. While this ethical obligation is not itself a form of domination, it does immediately require a sociopolitical system that can respond to these demands in a just manner. Maternal practice is a form of work and is thus exposed to exploitation and abuse, especially in a patriarchal society that degrades and devalues the varieties of labor that historically has been performed by women, servants and slaves and that is being done mostly by the populations most exploited by the neoliberal economic system: women of color and immigrant women.

The perspective of maternal thought allows us to illuminate Kropotkin’s analysis of the ways in which we are bound together such that we become responsible for the care of each other. His derivation of mutual aid from the instinct of a species may seem to be primarily an analysis of our essential biological nature. Additionally, we should interpret his discussion of evolution as an illustration of how our material lives are profoundly dependent upon and profoundly responsible for the care of others.

During Kropotkin’s time, Darwin’s idea of natural selection had been reinterpreted by Herbert Spencer as a doctrine of “the survival of the fittest” which provided a scientific foundation for Hobbes’s model of the state of nature as a war for dominance. In contrast, Kropotkin argued that the self-assertion of life already presupposes that living beings practice mutual support and mutual aid, “a feature of the greatest importance for the maintenance of life, the preservation of each species, and its further evolution,[[9]](#footnote-9)” a commitment to maternal ethics that furnishes the ground for communal existence and produces the material basis for sustaining biological life and satisfying our physical needs and desires.

Acknowledgement of our interlocking dependencies provides the basis for an anarchist society. Kropotkin claimed throughout his writings that individuals never provide the basis of their own existence: one’s own present position already depends upon a past created by others. He asserted, “If we have access to intellectual satisfactions and live in not too bad material circumstances, it is because we have benefited, through an accident of birth, by the exploitation to which the workers are subjected; and therefore the struggle for the emancipation of the workers is a duty, a debt which we must repay.[[10]](#footnote-10)” One’s own birth, the origin that provides a first principle *arche* of one’s present existence, is preceded by the anarchy of a past, by something that can never be assimilated as one’s own, an irreducible social and material debt to uncountable others.

*Every aspect of our own lives is already grounded upon the efforts of other people, on the products that have resulted from the multitude of lives that have labored, suffered, and died to produce them. Because we incur this debt before our own initiative and before the emergence of our own volition, it becomes absurd to claim any particular facet as one’s own private property. The belief that we exist as atomized individuals in pursuit of profits distorts the degree to which each of us is radically dependent upon others for our material existence. An anarchist society would instead recognize the profundity of this material dependency and would dedicate itself to satisfying human needs, sustaining each person’s well-being, and promoting their preservation, growth, and education.*

Reading Kropotkin’s ideas through theories of maternity allows us to distinguish his anarcho-communism from political liberalism and from varieties of anarchism that are based solely on individual autonomy and voluntary association. For example, Max Stirner argued that egoists should create a union amongst themselves in order to assert their own wills, declaring: “And if I can use him, I surely come to an understanding and reach an agreement with him, to strengthen my power through the agreement and to accomplish more through combined force than individual force could achieve. In this mutuality I see nothing at all beyond a multiplication of my strength, and I’ll keep at it only so long as it is my multiplied strength. But so it is an — association.[[11]](#footnote-11)”

In contrast, Kropotkin always discussed voluntary associations as responses to human needs rather than as vehicles for self-assertion. Throughout *Conquest of Bread,* he prefigured the voluntary organization of society with examples of volunteers who self-organized to author dictionaries, open hospitals, enumerate dwelling places, conduct scholarly research, and perform a myriad of tasks to fulfill human needs. These associations must be voluntary because state coercion and capitalist exploitation both impose additional sufferings and undermine social well-being in favor of individual profit. Yet the voluntary quality of these organizations is always grounded on involuntary obligation and debt.

The interdependence that people establish through such associations is always a mode of addressing the dependencies that constitute us and make us responsible for others. These obligations challenge us to organize an anarcho-communist society that will ethically respond to human needs and accommodate human dependencies, investing us with the freedom to establish forms of social organization that will meet these demands.

As we search for models for anarcho-communist societies of care, we can learn from the proposals of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha for a Fair Trade Emotional Labor Economy.[[12]](#footnote-12)  She explains that within communities of queer and disabled persons, the care of others is experienced as an urgent matter of survival: “your life as a working class or poor and/or sex working and/or disabled and/or Black or brown femme person has taught you that the only damn way you or anybody survives is by helping each other. No institutions exist to help us survive—we survive because of each other.” The everyday intensity of this necessity has made apparent the imbalances within these networks: namely, persons perceived as femmes or as feminine are often treated as resources to be exploited, as “mommies” who are always available to provide support for the needs, desires and demands of others. Piepzna-Samarasinha prompts us to acknowledge this emotional labor as work, and to recognize and recompense those who perform it, which is not only fair in itself but will also help to nourish a culture of mutual care. By the same token, as we realize the extent to which our everyday lives depend upon others and become conscious of how much labor has been expended to sustain us, we can become more deliberate about creating a society that both allows people to receive the care they need and sustains those who provide care.

1. *Karaniya Metta Sutta: The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness*, tr. The Amaravati Sangha, 2004,<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.1.08.amar.html> (accessed January 1, 2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Malatesta, Errico: *Life and Ideas: The Anarchist Writings of Errico Malatesta*, ed. Vernon Richards and Carl Levy, Oakland, PM Press, Oakland CA, 2015, p. 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hobbes, Thomas: *De Cive*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Glazebrook, Trish: “Architecture against mortality,” *Interfaces,* 21/22(1), 51-58, p. 52 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Levinas, Emmanuel: *Otherwise than being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis*,* Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1998, p 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kittay, Eva Feder: *Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency*, New York, Routledge, 1998, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, p. 109 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ruddick, Sara, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1995, p. 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kropotkin, Peter: *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*, New York, McClure Phillips, 1902, p. ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Malatesta: *Life and Ideas,* p. 248 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Stirner, Max: *The Unique and Its Property,* tr. Wolfi Landstreicher, Baltimore, Underworld Amusements, 2017, p. 324 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. “Modest Proposal for a Fair Trade Emotional Labor Economy (Centered by Disabled, Femme of Color, Working Class/Poor Genius)” *Bitch Media*, 13 July 2017, https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/modest-proposal-fair-trade-emotional-labor-economy/centered-disabled-femme-color-working [↑](#footnote-ref-12)