# **Kropotkin as Mother**

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(for Mona Cowen)

*“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-2)

Let us begin this remembrance of the centenary of Kropotkin’s death with the testimony delivered on the tenth anniversary by his old friend Errico Malatesta. 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-3) 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 anarchocommunism already expressed what various feminist thinkers describe as “maternal practice”?

Before we 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 instead 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 anarchocommunism differs both from liberal political theory and from other varieties of anarchism in how it draws our attention to the ways in which we are constitutionally dependent upon others. Prior to the assertion of a free and autonomous will that would form mutual agreements with other free and autonomous wills, we find ourselves needing other people and responsible for the needs of others. In this paper, we will first consider 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 anarchocommunist 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-4) 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 previous organic debts or connections.

Created from nothingness, such an individual relates to nature not as 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 collision of lifeless and inhuman forces, giving rise both to physical activity and human consciousness. In this conception, human beings become the expressions of material wills-to-power that drive individuals to strive ceaselessly to expand their own power and glory.

When these individuals enter into social relations with other individuals, this voluntary self-assertion finds itself in competition with other wills -- a struggle that, left to 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 to 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 of the nature of birth, we can distinguish a process of temporal becoming that is distinct from an impersonal mechanism that produces life from the metabolic decay of death. Alongside the collision of anonymous material forces that displace each other to establish their dominance, 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-5)

Glazebrook encourages us to consider this birthing relationship not as a singular event but rather as something that structures our every moment of becoming. She employs the term *archē*, an ancient Greek word that connotes both a temporal origin and a political authority, to conceive of birth as an ordering principle of growth that governs development over time.[[5]](#footnote-6)

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 any origin or basis, an anarchy so disruptive that it irrevocably disturbs any attempt to posit one’s own individual self as an unconditioned first principle.

Before the beginning of every moment of one’s life, the materiality of one’s body already depends upon 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.”[[6]](#footnote-7) 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 that which surrounds us, in which the very substance of our bodies becomes constituted by the air that had constituted other bodies in the past, and that will constitute yet 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 one another disrupts the illusion that we appear on the political stage as an association of equals, each asserting their own will to promote their own project and to exert their domination over others.

Prior to our establishment as autonomous selves, we already require that other people have provided us allowances and accommodations; prior to the self-assertion of our wills, we already find ourselves bound by ethical obligations. As Eva Kittay points out, we exist in nested sets of relationships, locating us in networks where we are both obligated to care for others and deserving of care from others.[[7]](#footnote-8) The distribution and organization of care is of utmost importance in developing a just society.

Just as being dependent upon 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, one 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, home health aides, and so on. As Eva Kittay urges, we must develop a society that recognizes the central importance of human dependency, and that provides for both human dependents and those who perform dependency work.[[8]](#footnote-9)

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 preserves the life of the child, nourishes their growth and prepares them for acceptance in the wider society. Given that human infants are not physically or mentally capable of taking care of themselves for extended periods of time, the maternal practice that preserves human life is essential for both individual and collective survival. Maternal practices begin with an awareness of these needs as demands and a commitment to the work that satisfies them. “To be committed to meeting children’s demand 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.”[[9]](#footnote-10)

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

These feminist discussions of dependency and maternity are echoed by Kropotkin’s analysis of the ways in which we are bound together. By attributing mutual aid to the evolutionary instinct of a species, he illustrated how much our material lives are profoundly dependent upon and 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 basis for Hobbes’s model of the state of nature as a war for dominance. In contrast, Kropotkin argued that the self-assertion of life presupposes 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,”[[10]](#footnote-11) a commitment to maternal ethics that lays the foundation 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 for 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.”[[11]](#footnote-12) One’s own birth, the origin that provides a first principle *archē* 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 innumerable others.

Every aspect of our own lives is already built 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 the emergence of our own initiative and volition, it becomes absurd to claim any particular facet of the world 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 recognizes the profundity of this material dependency and dedicates itself to satisfying human needs, sustaining each person’s well-being, and promoting their preservation, growth, and education.

Reading Kropotkin’s ideas through feminist theories allows us to distinguish his anarchocommunism from not only political liberalism, but also from varieties of anarchism based solely on individual autonomy and voluntary association. Max Stirner offered an example of such an individualist form of anarchism, arguing 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.”[[12]](#footnote-13)

By contrast, Kropotkin always presented 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 other tasks attending to human needs. Kropotkin argued that such associations must be voluntary because state coercion and capitalist exploitation 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 does so by embracing the dependencies that constitute who we are and our responsibilities towards others. Such obligations challenge us to envision and organize an anarchocommunist society that will respond ethically 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 anarchocommunist societies of care, we can learn from the proposals of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha for a Fair Trade Emotional Labor Economy.[[13]](#footnote-14)  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 exposed 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 support and nurture 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, not only because caregivers deserve to be treated fairly but also because it will encourage the cultivation of a broader culture of mutual care. By the same token, as we realize the extent to which our everyday lives depend upon others and appreciate how much labor has been and is being expended to sustain us, we can become more deliberate about creating a society that both allows people to receive the care they need and supports those who provide care, an anarchocommunist society that fulfills the vision of Kropotkin and feminists alike.

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-2)
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-3)
3. Hobbes, Thomas: *De Cive*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Glazebrook, Trish: “Architecture against mortality,” *Interfaces,* 21/22(1), 51-58, p. 52 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Levinas, Emmanuel: *Otherwise than being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis*,* Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1998, p 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Kittay, Eva Feder: *Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency*, New York, Routledge, 1998, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Ibid, p. 109 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Ruddick, Sara, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1995, p. 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Kropotkin, Peter: *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*, New York, McClure Phillips, 1902, p. ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Malatesta: *Life and Ideas,* p. 248 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Stirner, Max: *The Unique and Its Property,* tr. Wolfi Landstreicher, Baltimore, Underworld Amusements, 2017, p. 324 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. 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-14)