

INTRODUCTION (French Edition – 1926)¹

Ethics is the last work written by Peter Kropotkin to which he dedicated the last years of his life and was intended to be the crowning achievement to his theoretical, philosophical and sociological works.

Perhaps certain readers will be surprised and disappointed by the opinions professed by Kropotkin in this matter; maybe they expect from the theoretician of anarchism an individualistic Ethics. And, indeed, Kropotkin elaborates comprehensively his moral theories concerning the individual, on their nature, both physical and psychological; all the while denouncing equally religious principles as much as metaphysical ones, his conclusion from this was to repudiate all other-worldly sources of morality. But what is the element which, concerning humanity, is, in his eyes, the basis and the principal source of morality? It is our social instinct, with all of its superior derivatives that form the content of all morality: sympathy for one another, solidarity, mutual aid, the sense of justice, generosity, abnegation. This ensemble of emotions and instincts is inherent to humanity, just like social life is. Society *preceeded* humanity; it existed before our anthropological ancestor even became human. That is an idea which Kropotkin expresses more than once in his Ethics and to which he worked for a long time developing for 'Mutual Aid.' - This point of view, while being diametrically opposed to an individualist perspective, does not include, at all, any subjugation of the individual: on the contrary, it creates a harmony between the individual and society and raises the individual to a height that cannot be attained in any religious or metaphysical morality.

The first volume of Ethics, for which we are offering the French version, is dedicated almost exclusively to a critical summary of the major ethical philosophies to date; the last chapter, which should have included a critique of Stirner, Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Multatuli, and other modern thinkers remains unfinished. The second volume, still unedited, does not make a complete text: it is rather a series of sketches linked together with a common plan, a general guiding idea. This text is far from being complete, but it is sufficiently developed so that the thinking of the author is clearly revealed. Here it is:

The evolution of morality has three consecutive stages. The first is common to both humanity and animals with higher intelligence: it is the instinct of *socialibility*, which manifests itself in acts of mutual aid. The second evolves from this first basic instinct, as the development of the sentiments of sympathy, kindness, etc., and leads to the creation of a series of moral rules, at the foundation of which is found the notions of *justice* and *equality* between people. This is the elementary morality, the daily morality, which is indispensable to all societies. But there exists something which is superior to it, something which, singly, maybe, merits the name morality: it's what we could call, lacking any better word, *generosity*; it is what we find at the bottom of all acts where people spend without counting, without considering if they will receive something equivalent, such as would require a sense of strict accounting. It is the last and third member of this trilogy, the highest possible level in the evolution of morality.

While awaiting the forthcoming publication of the second volume for which we just gave you an idea of the principle guiding themes, we will read with interest, in this book, the vast moral enquiry to which Kropotkin dedicated himself before developing his own proper system.

MARIE GOLDSMITH

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¹ Translated from the French by Christopher Coquard.