This apparent discordance between nature’s way and any hope for human social decency has defined the major subject for debate about ethics and evolution ever since Darwin. Huxley’s solution has won many supporters – nature is nasty and no guide to morality except, perhaps, as an indicator of what to avoid in human society. My own preference lies with a different solution based on taking Darwin’s metaphorical view of struggle seriously (admittedly in the face of Darwin’s own preference for gladiatorial examples); nature is sometimes nasty, sometimes nice (really neither, since the human terms are so inappropriate). By presenting examples of all behaviors (under the metaphorical rubric of struggle), nature favors none and offers no guidelines. The facts of nature cannot provide moral guidance in any case.

But a third solution has been advocated by some thinkers who do wish to find a basis for morality in nature and evolution. Since few can detect much moral comfort in the gladiatorial interpretation, this third position must re-formulate the way of nature. Darwin’s words about the metaphorical nature of struggle offer a promising starting point. One might argue that the gladiatorial examples have been over-sold and misrepresented as predominant. Perhaps cooperation and mutual aid are the more common results of struggle for existence. Perhaps communion rather than combat leads to greater reproductive success in most circumstances.

The most famous expression of this third solution may be found in Mutual Aid, published in 1902 by the Russian revolutionary anarchist Petr Kropotkin. (One must shed the old stereotype of anarchists as bearded bomb throwers furtively stalking about city streets at night. Kropotkin was a genial man, almost saintly according to some, who promoted a vision of small communities setting their own standards by consensus for the benefit of all, thereby eliminating the need for most functions of a central government.) Kropotkin was a Russian nobleman, living in English exile for political reasons. He wrote Mutual Aid (in English) as a direct response to the essay of Huxley quoted above, “The Struggle for Existence in Human Society,” published in The Nineteenth Century, in February 1888. Kropotkin responded to Huxley with a series of articles, also printed in The Nineteenth Century and eventually collected together as the book Mutual Aid.

As the title suggests, Kropotkin argues, as his cardinal premise, that the struggle for existence usually leads to mutual aid rather than combat as the chief criterion of evolutionary success. Human society must therefore build upon our natural inclinations (not reverse them, as Huxley held) in formulating a moral order that will bring both peace and prosperity to our species. In a series of chapters, Kropotkin tries to illustrate continuity between natural selection for mutual aid among animals and the basis for success in increasingly progressive human social organization. His five sequential chapters address mutual aid among animals, among savages, among barbarians, in the medieval city, and amongst ourselves.

I confess that I have always viewed Kropotkin as daftly idiosyncratic, if undeniably well meaning. So is he always presented in a standard course on evolutionary biology (if he is mentioned at all) – as one of those soft and woolly thinkers who let hope and sentimentality get in the way of analytic toughness and a willingness to accept nature as she is, warts and all. After all, he was a man of strange politics and unworkable ideals, wrenched from the context of his youth, a stranger in a strange land. Moreover, his portrayal of Darwin so matched his social ideals (mutual aid naturally given as a product of evolution without need for central authority) that one could only see personal hope rather than scientific accuracy in his accounts. Kropotkin has long been on my list of potential topics for an essay (if only...
because I wanted to read his book, and not merely mouth the textbook interpretation), but I never proceeded because I could find no larger context than the man himself. Kooky intellects are interesting as gossip, perhaps as psychology, but true idiosyncrasy is the worst possible basis for generality.

This situation changed for me in a flash last month when I read a very fine article in *Isis* (our leading professional journal in the history of science) by Daniel P. Todes: “Darwin’s Malthusian Metaphor and Russian Evolutionary Thought, 1859–1917,” vol. 78, 1988, pp. 537–51. I learned that the parochiality had been mine in my ignorance of Russian evolutionary thought, not Kropotkin’s in his isolation in England. I can read Russian, but only painfully, and with a dictionary – which means, for all practical purposes, that I can’t read it. I knew that Darwin had become a hero of the Russian intelligentsia and had influenced academic life in Russia perhaps more than in any other country. But virtually none of this Russian work has ever been translated or even discussed in English literature. The ideas of this school are unknown to us; we do not even recognize the names of the major protagonists. I knew Kropotkin because he had published in English and lived in England, but I never understood that he represented a standard, well-developed Russian critique of Darwin, based on interesting reasons and coherent national traditions. Todes’s article does not make Kropotkin more correct, but it does place his writing into a general context that demands our respect and produces substantial enlightenment. Kropotkin was part of a mainstream flowing in an unfamiliar direction, not an isolated little arroyo.