In this chapter I will set out a general introduction to the ethical foundations of Proudhon’s anarchism. I will contextualise it within Proudhon’s own intellectual development, the arguments his contemporaries and near contemporaries were making, and against the socio-historical background of late-nineteenth-century France. This aspect of his thought has not been widely discussed in the English language literature (Harbold, 1969; Hoffman, 1972), leading to little understanding of how the central animating concept of Proudhon’s life’s work – justice – fits into his economic theory. This is what I will do here. In this way I aim to illustrate why Proudhon believed that people’s workplaces and economic futures were not things to be gambled with by distant individuals on frenetic markets or governed according to the (un)informed whim of politicians. He called for an approach to property that undermined the moral justification for private title and buttressed a theory of democratic worker control. By locating democracy at the heart of people’s lives – at their place of work – Proudhon argued that civic participation would gain far fuller expression. Since it is in our places of work that we feel our rights and duties most keenly, the extension of the republican impulse into this domain of life was absolutely crucial to Proudhon and a moral imperative for the realisation of social justice. Active individuals and collectives, engaged in the daily business of democratic political economy; this was how Proudhon understood republicanism. To tame the market and structure the economy in more equitable ways, Proudhon called for the federation of trades, towns and regions, and he believed that through this twin process of the socialisation of title through democratic worker control and the federation of the plural social cleavages of society, capitalist anarchy would be brought under control, while moral and socio-political autonomy would be returned to the people.
Proudhon’s theory of ethics was naturalistic. He believed ethics were fundamentally driven by our instincts and mollified by our conscience and our reason. That said, Proudhon was also deeply historical, arguing clearly that our instinct is always realised within specific historical and social contexts. While instinct is what unites us, it is the diversity of cultures which, in practice if not in principle, divides us. He argued against the rationalists, particularly Immanuel Kant, but retained their ethical defence of the individual. He took liberally from Auguste Comte, whose positivist sociology drew on the most up-to-date scientific findings to argue that our fixed biological natures and the material teleology within society guided history, but rejected Comte’s total denunciation of free will. Proudhon sought to retain Comte’s understanding of the biological origin of morality and the social contexts for its realisation; he also wanted to retain the idea that society was qualitatively distinct from the individual, but he refused the crude positivist ‘Religion of Humanity’ that Comte believed flowed inexorably from his own scientific findings.

In painting this picture of Proudhon’s moral and political philosophy I will also draw extensively on Proudhon’s published texts and the relevant secondary literature. My approach deviates somewhat from the standard treatment of Proudhon’s republicanism. This is Steven Vincent’s (1984) excellent Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism. Through a close reading of some of Proudhon’s best-known works and set against rich historical contextualisation, Vincent demonstrates that ‘Proudhon had a consistent vision of society and its needs, a vision which is pre-eminently moral, and which revolves around his desire to install a federal arrangement of workers’ associations and to instil a public regard for republican virtue’ (1984: 3–4). Vincent’s focus is political and social rather than ethical, so he draws on Rousseau and Montesquieu’s thought for the antecedents of Proudhon’s political philosophy. I focus on Proudhon’s theory of justice and while I inevitably come to similar general conclusions to Vincent, I arrive at them from a quite different angle.

Perhaps the central distinction between my approach and Vincent’s will be my focus on Proudhon’s undisputed magnum opus, De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l’Église (1988/1990 [2nd edn 1860]). By his own admission, Vincent does not engage with this text ‘in any detail’ (1984: 225), but this text, which in its current edition is over 2000 pages long and is divided between 12 études or studies, gives us a radically different perspective on Proudhon’s republican anarchism. In it we find the basics of Proudhon’s theory of human nature, his understanding of the origin of the moral sentiment, how this sentiment is shaped by