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Neo-Realism: Post-Postmodern Ethics and Metaphysics

Cody Chun¹

I. Antirealism

In his presentation “Reality as Unamendableness” at the conference “On the Ashes of Post-Modernism: A New Realism,” Maurizio Ferraris demonstrated the implausibility of Friedrich Nietzsche’s constructivist thesis “There are no facts, only interpretations” by suggesting that the statement weakens if “facts” is replaced by “cats.” Doubtful of postmodern philosophy, the conference prefigured the emergence of a new realism in the aftermath of postmodernism. In what follows, I consider post-postmodernism in terms of this neo-realist turn.²

Postmodern thought can be defined by its rejection of an objective reality, or a reality that exists apart from its being thought, in favor of an understanding of reality as the product of texts (Derrida), discourses (Foucault), interpretations (Nietzsche, Vattimo), and social constructs (Berger and Luckmann). Because it rejects the idea that the world exists objectively, postmodern thought is antirealist.³ In *Realism and Anti-Realism*, Stuart Brock and Edwin Mares define antirealism as the philosophy that denies that anything external to thought exists. They write, “A realist about a domain of *F*s typically claims that the *F*s exist ‘outside our minds’, and that... the realm of *F*s exists mind-independently. An anti-realist, of course, rejects this characterization”

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² The term “neo-realist” is my stylistic preference. I intend the definition that Ferraris provides in *Introduction to New Realism*: “New realism... is a reoccurring function: the reaction to a previous antirealist hegemony” (11).

³ In his characterization of postmodernism, Bernd Magnus includes “an anti- (or post-) epistemological standpoint; an anti-essentialism; anti-realism; anti-foundationalism; opposition to transcendental arguments and transcendental standpoints; rejection of the picture of knowledge as accurate representation; rejection of truth as correspondence to reality...; and a suspicion of grand narratives” (726). According to Magnus, postmodern thought can be characterized by a distrust of the non-internal, or of that which cannot be known.

(34). Antirealism, then, is premised on the assumption that reality exists only insofar as it is constructed by the mind.

Because it rejects an objective reality and the truth pertaining thereunto, postmodern antirealism represents a crisis for belief. In *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Stanley Fish suggests that belief requires a concept of truth and falsehood. He writes, “If one believes what one believes, then one believes that what one believes is true, and conversely, one believes that what one doesn’t believe is not true” (361). As Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp suggest in “Against Theory,” such a definition of belief requires that truth be objective:

To imagine that we can see the beliefs we hold as no better than but ‘merely different’ from opposing beliefs held by others is to imagine a position from which we can see our beliefs without really believing them. To be in this position would be to see the truth about beliefs without actually having any—to know without believing. (739)

By revealing the contradiction in not believing that our beliefs are truer than other contradictory beliefs—that is, by believing that our beliefs correspond to subjective, or relative, truths—Benn Michaels and Knapp suggest that belief assumes the objectivity of its truth, for an understanding of truth as relative contradicts the presupposition of belief to truth above other falsehoods. Thus, by rejecting the objective and, thus, truth, postmodern antirealism rejects the possibility of belief, or of a belief that does not contradict its presuppositions.⁴

⁴ Here postmodern antirealism demonstrates its theoretical untenability. In *The Last Word*, Thomas Nagel writes, “The claim ‘Everything is subjective’ must be nonsense, for it would itself have to be either subjective or objective. But it can’t be objective, since in that case it would be false if true. And it can’t be subjective, because then it would not rule out any objective claim, including the claim that it is objectively false” (53). If the objective does not exist, then the antirealist claim that the objective does not exist cannot claim to represent an objective truth without contradicting itself. The self-invalidating logic of postmodern antirealism invalidates its claim to truth as no more justified than other contradictory claims.

In addition to precluding belief, the postmodern antirealist rejection of the objective also entails a turn to ethical relativism. In *Postmodern Ethics*, Zygmunt Bauman writes, “The novelty of the postmodern approach to ethics consists... in... the rejection of the... philosophical search for absolutes, universals and foundations [or objectivity] in theory” (3-4).⁵ Thus, a postmodern ethics is predicated on the relativism of its antirealist ontology. By privileging the reality and truth of the subject and by rejecting the objective, postmodern antirealism also privileges the “truth” of the subject’s individual ethics, rejecting the possibility of an objective ethics and necessitating ethical relativism.

I turn now to two post-postmodern cultural artifacts: Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* and the discursive response to the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting.⁶ As a work of post-postmodern literature, *A Little Life* is significant because it theorizes neo-realist metaphysics. In the context of its concern with ethics, *A Little Life*’s neo-realist theory articulates a break with antirealism by demonstrating the inadequacy of relativism as a response to unethical acts. I then identify neo-realism in the discursive response to the Sandy Hook shooting. In so doing, I theorize post-postmodernism, in both its theoretical and social instantiations, as an ethically-motivated rejection of antirealism in favor of neo-realism. Post-postmodernism so understood entails a return to belief.

⁵ “Absolutes, universals and foundations” are metonyms for objectivity, as they describe that which exists apart from and, thus, pertains to more than the subject.

⁶ The notion that postmodernism is an inadequate philosophy for the contemporary world is not unprecedented. Aside from the conference “On the Ashes of Post-Modernism: A New Realism,” in *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*, José Lopez and Garry Potter write, “A new and different intellectual direction must come after postmodernism, simply because postmodernism is inadequate as an intellectual response to the... philosophical, scientific and social scientific challenges of this new century” (4). Ramón Saldívar makes a similar point along literary and socio-political lines in “Speculative Realism and the Posttrace Aesthetic in Contemporary American Fiction.” He writes: “Postmodernism has proven to be simply too distantly removed from the real world of justice and injustice and too pessimistic about the possibility of freedom and right to make it the basis for an attractive form of imaginative creativity” (519).

II. Neo-Realism and Yanagihara's Ethical Justification for Belief

A Little Life theorizes neo-realist metaphysics by suggesting that the antirealist premise that the subject cannot know the objective does not mean that objective does not exist. Indeed, though it departs from its postmodern premises, *A Little Life* begins with this antirealist assumption, affirming the necessarily subjective nature of a subject's truth. The novel reads:

“[Pure logic] proves... the almost infinite elasticity of mathematics itself, within the accepted set of assumptions by which we define it... [it proves] the impossible yet consistent internal logic of math itself.

“So for example, I might say to you ‘All positive numbers are real. Two is a positive number. Therefore, two must be real.’ But this isn't actually true, right? It's a derivation, a supposition of truth. I haven't actually proven that two is a real number, but it must logically be true. So you'd write a proof to, in essence, prove that the logic of those two statements is in fact real.” (141-2)

The distinction that the passage draws between the “actually true” and the “logically... true” points to the distinction between objective truth and subjective truth. Pure logic is premised on the idea that mathematical truth only pertains within the limits of, or is “internal” to, the “accepted set of assumptions” of the mathematical logic that produces it, such that the statements “All positive numbers are real. Two is a positive number” represent logical “assumptions” from which the final statement “Therefore, two must be real” derives a truth. Yet, as the passage suggests, this “derivation... of truth” is only “logically... true”; it cannot be known to be true outside of the logic of mathematics. Logic, then, limits pure logic, qualifying truth (“*logically* be true”) and replacing truth as the object of mathematical inquiry (“to, in essence, prove that the *logic* [not the truth] of those two statements is in fact real”). The delimitation of mathematical

truth to the “accepted set of assumptions by which we define” mathematics reveals the subjective nature of mathematical truth. Because “we [subjects] define” mathematics and because mathematical truth pertains only to the “internal logic of math itself,” truth becomes subjective, applying only within the subjective mathematics that “we” define.

This confinement of mathematical truth to its subjective logic is suggested in the following passage: “A beautiful proof... combines just a handful of different concepts, albeit from across the mathematical universe, and... leads to a grand and new generalized truth in mathematics: that is, a wholly provable, unshakable absolute in a constructed world with very few unshakable absolutes” (144). By prepositionally qualifying the “truth” and the “absolute” that they modify, the phrases “from across the mathematical universe,” “in mathematics,” and “in a constructed world,” situate and emphasize, in their repetition, the situated-ness of mathematical truth in its constructed mathematics. Because a “constructed world” requires a subject to construct it, the mathematical truth of a “constructed world” represents not an objective truth, or a truth that exists apart from thought, but rather the subjective truth of a subjectively constructed logic.

The thesis that mathematical truth is the subjective truth of a subjectively constructed logic suggests in antirealist fashion that subjects, given their inability to think the objective, are limited to the subjective truths of their constructed logics. In *The Quadruple Object*, Graham Harman writes, “If we try to think a world outside human thought, then we are *thinking* it, and hence it is no longer outside thought” (emphasis original; 60). If the subject can only prove the existence of the objective world by thinking it, then any attempt on the part of the subject to prove that the objective exists will fail, for to know the existence of the objective is to know that which, by definition, cannot be known. Because the subject cannot know the objective, the truth

of any constructed system, such as mathematics, must always be subjective insofar as it is known; and objective truth must always be inaccessible to the subject, for if objective truth were known, it would, by being known, be subjective.

Yet, while it accepts the antirealist premise that the objective cannot be known, the novel departs from postmodern thought by suggesting through analogy that the fact that the objective cannot be known does not mean that the objective does not exist. The novel reads:

Life... is the axiom of the empty set. It begins in zero and ends in zero. We know that both states exist, but we will not be conscious of either experience: they are states that are necessary parts of life, even as they cannot be experienced *as* life. We *assume* the concept of nothingness, but we cannot prove it. But it *must* exist.
(emphases original; 326)

The axiom of the empty set posits a principle of unknowable existence that also describes the relationship between the subject and the objective. Interpreted in terms of life and death, the axiom of the empty set states that, insofar as knowing is fundamental to the subject, only life can be known. By precluding life and, thus, knowledge, death cannot be known. Thus, though we assume that zero or death exists, we cannot prove it, for death, by precluding life, also precludes knowledge and its proof. This relation between life and death, and between non-zero and zero, is analogous to the relation between subject and object because both relations depend on an opposition between a knowing subject and an unknowable object whose existence, by depending on its independence from the subject, cannot be proven. Like zero, the objective cannot be proven to exist, for its proof requires it, as a concept whose objectivity depends on its not being known, to be known. The novel's invocation of the axiom of the empty set, then, suggests through analogy that, though one cannot prove that the objective exists, one need not, per

postmodern antirealism, reject the existence of the objective, for one can assume that such a world exists. Thus, despite the fact that the objective is unknowable, the novel maintains that it, like zero and like death, exists and constructs a neo-realist ontology with the following assumptions: (1) the objective is unknowable; yet, (2) the objective exists. In so doing, the novel departs from its postmodern antirealist premise, suggesting that, though we cannot prove that the objective exists, we can assume that it does.

The novel calls this act of knowing without knowing belief. It reads, “*The hardest thing is not finding the knowledge*, Brother Luke once said to [Jude] after he’d confessed he was having difficulty believing in God. *The hardest thing is believing it*” (emphases original; 226). The syntactically ambiguous first sentence, which reads as both “Finding the knowledge is not the hardest thing” and “Not finding the knowledge is the hardest thing,” presents congruent theses about the relation between the subject and the objective (or, in this case, God). The first reading suggests that knowing is not the hardest thing, for, insofar as humans think, they also know and cannot not know that which they think. The second reading suggests that not knowing is the hardest thing. Because the objective requires that it be not known and because the subject cannot prove the objective without knowing it and, therefore, contradicting its objectivity, the inability of the subject to know (prove) the objective without knowing is the hardest thing. Thus, the ambiguous syntax of the first sentence reflects the ontological paradox of the novel: the subject cannot know the objective because the subject cannot know without knowing. The final sentence “The hardest thing is believing” names this paradox. If knowing is not the hardest thing (for the subject knows) and if not knowing is the hardest thing (for the subject cannot not know) and if believing is the hardest thing, then the hardest thing is knowing the objective without knowing it, or contradicting its objectivity. When taken together, the passage’s theses represent

the total ontological thesis of the novel: Belief is knowing without knowing, or assuming without proving, that the objective exists.⁷

As the metaphysical basis of *A Little Life*, neo-realism can be read as a reaction to the inadequate response of relativism to unethical acts. The novel establishes its thematic concern with ethics by suggesting the need for an ethical interpretation of Jude's abuse. It reads, "Fairness is for happy people... Right and wrong, however, are for—well, not unhappy people, maybe, but scarred people; scared people" (190). The phrase "scarred people" synecdochically refers to Jude, who is physically scarred by his past abuse and self-abuse. By suggesting that "right and wrong... are for... scarred people" and, thus, for Jude, the novel frames Jude's experiences in terms of right and wrong.

Yet, the nature of such an ethics depends on the ontology that underlies it. The novel identifies two types of ethics that result from the ontologies that it juxtaposes: an objective (neo-realist) and a subjective (antirealist) ethics. It reads:

You have to tell yourself every day: I am doing the right thing. To let [Jude] do what he wants to do [commit suicide] is abhorrent to the *laws* of nature... You think, what is a child for? Is he to give me comfort? Is he for me to give comfort to? And if a child can no longer be comforted, is it my job to give him permission to leave? (802-3)

The first part of the excerpt appeals to an objective ethics through the "laws of nature," which, by appealing to physical laws, such as the law of gravity, that both precede and exceed all

⁷ The importance of belief to the novel is further suggested in the passage, "The world has two kinds of people... Those who are inclined to believe, and those who aren't. In my courtroom, we value belief. Belief in *all* things," which, when read as a meta-textual comment, discloses the metaphysical investment of the novel in belief (123). The importance of belief is further suggested in passages on pages 418, 419, 784, 813, and 814. The word "believe" or a form thereof occurs 59 times in the novel.

subjects' conceptual schemes, suggests an anteriority to thought and, so un-thought, the objective nature of the laws. Thus, the appeal to "the laws of nature" represents an appeal to an objective ethics, or an ethics that exists apart from its being thought.⁸ By contrast, the second part of the excerpt appeals to a relativist ethics by implying that the ethical assessment of Jude's suicide depends on the subjective set of assumptions, or the constructed logic, that precedes it. The series of questions that precede the ethical question "Is it my job to give him permission to leave?" suggests that the answer to the ethical question depends on the answers that the subject provides to the preliminary questions. Because the questions appeal to the subject, or depend on subjective answers, the ethical question is predicated on the constructed, or relativist, logic of that subject. By juxtaposing these metaphysically divergent appeals, the novel suggests that the ethics through which the reader reads Jude's experience must be either objective or subjective.

Without the novel's neo-realist belief, the novel's admission that the subject cannot know the object suggests, according to antirealist logic, that an objective ethics, being unknowable, does not exist. Yet, a subjective ethics, the novel suggests, is inadequate because it assumes that any action is defensible from the position of the subject. This critique of ethical relativism is originally suggested in Yanagihara's first novel *The People in the Trees*, when the protagonist Norton witnesses nine men rape a boy on the boy's eighth birthday.⁹ In response to the ritual, Norton writes, "My time on Ivu'ivu taught me that all ethics or morals are culturally relative" (219). Norton's thesis acts as a point of reference to which the reader refers when Norton rapes his adopted U'ivuan son Victor.¹⁰ If the reader accepts Norton's relativist thesis, then the reader

⁸ In the context of its ethical question, Harold's appeal to the "laws of nature" also allusively appeals to the "natural law," or the "universal and invariable" law that "prescribes our most fundamental duties," further suggesting an appeal to an objective ethics (Maritain 97, 95).

⁹ According to the U'ivuan calendar. The boy would be "around ten by the Western calendar" (212).

¹⁰ The rape is complicated by the fact that the novel frames it in a way similar to the a'ina'ina. The U'ivuan chief identifies the a'ina'ina as an instructional experience: "The point of the ceremony was to instruct boys in the ways of lovemaking, and who better to teach a boy than another man?" (217). The novel presents Norton's rape of Victor as

cannot condemn Norton's rape of Victor as unethical, for other contradictory valuations of the act are then also valid, and a subjectively unethical act cannot, per Benn Michaels and Knapp, be objectively unethical. By suggesting that cultural relativism prevents the reader from condemning Norton's rape of Victor as (objectively) unethical, *The People in the Trees* prefigures *A Little Life*'s critique of ethical relativism.

In the context of its neo-realist theory, *A Little Life*'s "exaggerated" depiction of abuse implies the inadequacy of ethical relativism, and the antirealism that underpins it, as a response to unethical acts.¹¹ This inadequacy can be inferred from reader-responses to the novel's aesthetic connotations. Throughout the novel, Jude is raped, set on fire, run over, beaten, prostituted, kidnapped, taught to cut himself, and called "deformed," "repulsive," "disgusting," "worthless," a "whore," and "dirty" (383, 384, 625, 631); the abuse causes Jude, in turn, to harm himself. This exaggeration has earned the novel such ethically-charged labels as "torture porn" and "tragedy porn" (Duran; *The Reading Outlaw*).¹² Though Yanagihara's decision to exaggerate may or may not have been unethical, the reader's ethical response to the novel suggests that the abuse so exaggerated is unethical. Because any response to a work is a response to the content of that work, the fact that readers respond to the novel with ethical statements reflects the ethical

disciplinary and as conforming, in principle, to the culturally acceptable model of the a'ina'ina; it reads, "I [Norton] came to him [Victor] the next night... whispering that I would punish him, that I would break him, that I would force him to behave" (466). Through phrases such as "I would punish him" and "I would force him to behave," the novel ascribes to Norton's rape of Victor a disciplinary motivation, which is correctional and, thus, "instructional" in intent. The idea that Norton's actions are disciplinary is further suggested in the passage "I was growing weary of... thinking of new ways to punish him, to force him into obedience," in which the disciplinary motivation "to force him into obedience" is explicitly named (462). Insofar as discipline can be read as a form of instruction, Norton's rape of Victor can be read as congruent with U'ivuan ethics, especially since Victor is U'ivuan.

¹¹ I use Yanagihara's word: "I *don't* regret... the amount of abuse Jude endures... while you're [editor Gerry Howard] right that his level of suffering is extraordinary, it's not... implausible... Everything in this book is a little exaggerated..." (emphasis original).

¹² The novel's extreme violence has been compared to that of Jerzy Kosiński's *The Painted Bird*. It has also garnered trigger warnings. For a few of many examples, see: "Book Gush | *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara"; "A Little Life: An Unforgettable Novel About The Grace Of Friendship"; and "A Qualified Recommendation: *A Little Life*, by Hanya Yanagihara." A Google search with the terms "A Little Life trigger" yields illustrative results.

readings that the content of the novel prompts. That is, if the novel's depiction of abuse is unethical it is firstly because the abuse that it depicts is unethical. Because the novel's exaggeration correlates with the need to condemn the novel as unethical and because any ethical assessment of a work depends on an ethical assessment of that work's content, the ethically-charged labels "torture porn" and "tragedy porn" reflect the unethical nature of Jude's abuse. By eliciting this ethical response from readers, *A Little Life*'s exaggeration defies the reader to say that the actions of Jude's abusers are anything but unethical. Ethical relativism and the antirealism that undergirds it become inadequate as a response to Jude's abuse. Thus, at the same time that it admits the unknowability of the objective, *A Little Life*, in its exaggeration, also marks the need for an objective ethics.

With its exaggerated aesthetic, *A Little Life* demonstrates the shortcomings of ethical relativism as a response to unethical acts that defy relativism. The inadequacy of a subjective ethics reflects both the inadequacy of the antirealism that produces such an ethics and the need for an objective ethics and ontology with which to condemn and assert the existence of unethical acts. Insofar as a subjective ethics is rooted in antirealism, the novel's turn to neo-realism represents a turn to an objective ethics. Because postmodern antirealism fails to provide an objective ethics with which to condemn Jude's abusers' actions, the novel theorizes in its place a neo-realist ontology predicated on a belief in the objective and, thus, in an objective ethics. Belief, the novel suggests, is the attitude of post-postmodern neo-realism. It is to a non-fictional instantiation of this belief that I now turn.

III. Neo-Realism in the Discourse of Sandy Hook

Whereas *A Little Life* explicates neo-realism as a theory, the discursive response to the Sandy Hook shooting exemplifies neo-realism as a social attitude. By suggesting that the shooting cannot be relativized and by adopting a language of “evil” that metonymically implies the objective, the discourse expresses the inadequacy of relativism and, thus, of antirealism, as a response to ethical crises and instantiates, in its turn to the objective, the neo-realist metaphysics of *A Little Life*’s post-postmodernism. This discursive response to the shooting suggests that post-postmodernism is not only a theoretical, but also a practiced rejection of relativism in favor of belief.

In *The New Yorker* article “The Reckoning,” Andrew Solomon frames the shooting as an objective wrong by suggesting that its inexplicability results from its having been committed. He writes, “Yet no ‘motive’ can mitigate the horror of a bloodbath involving children. Had we found out—which we did not—that Adam had schizophrenia, or had been a pedophile or a victim of childhood abuse, we still wouldn’t know *why* he acted as he did” (emphasis original). By suggesting that no motive could explain the shooting more than the lack of a motive could, Solomon suggests that the inexplicability of the shooting results not from the lack of a motive but rather from the action itself: the shooting necessitates its inexplicability. The shooting’s intrinsic inexplicability is further suggested in the sentence “The reason that almost no one shoots twenty random children isn’t self-restraint; it’s that there is no level at which the idea is attractive.” The use of “no” as an absolute negative suggests that, even for the person who shoots “twenty random children,” the action must be absolutely unattractive. By suggesting that the shooting can never be explained to have been attractive to Lanza, Solomon suggests an ontological bifurcation between the explanation and the action, such that any explanation must be inadequate insofar as it attempts to relativize—or understand in terms of a subject’s motive—

that which cannot be relativized. The idea that the inexplicability of the shooting can only be accounted for by the objective wrongness of the act reveals, beyond its rejection of relativism, the discourse's neo-realist belief in objective ethical values.

Solomon further reveals the neo-realist assumptions of his writing when he writes, "There are many crimes from which most people desist because we know right from wrong." In so writing, Solomon implies that those who defy "right and wrong" do so not because their ethics differ from those of others' (relativism), but rather because they do *not* "know right from wrong." By suggesting that right and wrong are either known or not known and not relative to the subject, Solomon implies that right and wrong are values not in a relativist but rather in an objective ethics, which most people know but which Lanza does not.¹³ The implication that the ethical value of an action is either known or not known and not determined by the subject reveals the neo-realist underpinnings of Solomon's ethics. That the discourse frames the shooting in objectivist terms despite the unknowability of the objective reflects the inability of ethical relativism to adequately explain the shooting and suggests that the discourse turns to the objective in order to justify the act's inexplicability.

The discourse's appeal to the objective in order to account for the shooting's objective inexplicability is reflected in the attempt of the University of Connecticut to determine through an analysis of Lanza's DNA if "there is a gene that makes some people 'evil'" (Smith). The appeal to genetics, like the appeal to the "laws of nature," is an appeal to an objective type of knowledge, or a knowledge that precedes and exceeds the subject; thus, the appeal to genetics represents the attempt to explain an objective wrong in objective terms. Essi Vidling attributes this turn to the objective to the failure of relativism to provide motives that adequately explain

¹³ Insofar as one can "know" the objective.

the shooting and to the resulting need to justify the shooting's inexplicability. She writes, "The authorities want to reassure people, 'We are doing our best to explain why this happened,' but the aim of the exercise is not scientifically informative because it only involves one person. It's a desire not to leave any stone unturned" (qtd. in Smith). The fact that scientists are attempting to discover an objective explanation for Lanza's actions, despite the inconclusiveness of such a study, suggests that the turn to the objective is motivated by a need to account for the inexplicability of the shooting in the absence of an adequate subjective explanation. Thus, the turn to genetics reflects the search for an "objective" explanation for an objective wrong in light of the failure of relativism to make sense of the shooting.

The turn to neo-realism in response to the shooting is further suggested by the discourse's unanimous condemnation of Lanza as "evil." In an address following the shooting, Governor of Connecticut Daniel Malloy said, "Evil visited this community today." At the Presentation of the 2012 Presidential Citizens Medals, President Barack Obama said, "When Dawn Hochsprung, and Mary Sherlach, Vicki Soto, Lauren Rousseau, Rachel D'Avino, Anne Marie Murphy... showed up for work at Sandy Hook Elementary... they had no idea that evil was about to strike." In "The voices of children who saw evil," Michael Mayko and John Pirro write, "They saw evil that day dressed in black and standing before them. It was named Adam Lanza." In the video "Evil Did Not Win," Alissa Parker, the mother of one of the victims, says, "I felt so consumed with how evil could be so powerful... Evil did not win." Adam's father Peter, in "The Reckoning," is cited as saying, "You can't get any more evil." The discourse's unanimous adoption of a language of "evil" indicates the absolute moral response to the shooting.

This adoption of a language of evil metonymically encodes a turn to the objective. Solomon writes, "The psychiatric profession doesn't consider mass killers to be necessarily

insane, which distresses Peter [Adam's father]... [Park Dietz] wrote that we insist that mass killers are *insane* only to reassure ourselves that normal people are incapable of such *evil*" (emphasis mine). In the discursive eye, insanity metonymically implies evil. If to label Lanza evil is to label him insane, and if to label Lanza insane is to suggest, in Solomon's words, that "he didn't know that what he was doing was wrong," then to label Lanza evil is to suggest that he does not know "right from wrong," which is to say that he does not know that shooting "twenty random children" is objectively unethical. Thus, by calling Lanza insane, the discursive adoption of "evil" accounts for the inexplicability of the shooting and affirms, in neo-realist fashion, its objective wrongness.

The discursive turn to the objective in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting represents a rejection of postmodern antirealism for its inadequate response to an objective wrong. The turn to the objective entails an act of belief, manifested in the insistence of people on knowing, though they cannot know, an objective ethics. When he writes that "we know right from wrong," Solomon implies that, though an objective ethics is unprovable, it is not wholly unknowable insofar as it can be believed in. The unified moral condemnation of Lanza as evil and, thus, without knowledge of objective ethical values reflects the ability of the people to "know," or assume, that Lanza was objectively wrong, even though to prove the objective is impossible. The post-postmodern turn, then, can be described as a rejection of postmodern antirealism in favor of belief for the reason that postmodern antirealism fails to provide an adequate ethical response to crises such as the Sandy Hook shooting.

The embrace of a language of "evil" and the turn to an objective ethics can also be noted in the discursive response to the 2012 shooting in Aurora, the 2016 shooting in Orlando, the

2007 shooting at Virginia Tech, and the 2016 shooting in Dallas.¹⁴ The consistent response of the discourse to crimes such as these suggests a general turn from the antirealist metaphysics of postmodern thought to a neo-realist belief in the objective and in an objective ethics. Faced with crises of such depravity that no subjective motives suffice to explain them, these discursive patterns signal an ontological modulation from antirealism to neo-realism and, with it, to an investment in belief as the pragmatic response to ethical crisis.

IV. Applied Neo-Realism

I have described the post-postmodern turn as a metaphysical turn from antirealism to neo-realism in light of the former's inadequacy as a response to ethical crisis. I do not mean to suggest that relativism has ever had traction as an ethics in practice. Indeed, I cannot think of many ethical crises that have not been responded to with objective, if contradictory, ethical statements. Rather, I mean only to suggest that, due to the recent theorization of a new realism, antirealism's inadequacy is now more likely than it was before to produce a post-postmodern metaphysics that rejects relativism in favor of belief.¹⁵ I conclude by considering an objection to this rejection of relativism and by suggesting that this objection, paradoxically, demonstrates the value of neo-realism as a metaphysics for more than ethical objectivism. By providing an ontology more

¹⁴ On Aurora: "Obama on Colorado Shooting: 'Such Evil is Senseless,'" "The Myth of the 'Evil' Defendant: Reflections on the Aurora Theater Shooting Case," "The Colorado Shooter: Psychotic Victim Or Evil Killer?," "Insane or evil? Trial fills in details of Colorado movie gunman Holmes," "Colorado's Hickenlooper Says Gun Control Won't Stop Evil"; on Orlando: "How the Orlando shooting unfolded: 'He came in with the intent of evil,'" "Orlando parents react: 'Love and good will always outweigh evil,'" "President Obama: Nation and Orlando 'Shaken by an Evil, Hateful Act,'" "Orlando Shooting An 'Evil Homophobic Terrorist Attack,' Says David Cameron," "Orlando Shooting: Pastor Donnie Romero Calls Victims 'Evil', 'Scum Of The Earth'"; on Virginia Tech: "Virginia Tech Was An Act Of Evil, Not A 'Tragedy,'" "The Virginia Tech Shooter: Mentally Ill or Evil?," "Pure Evil"; on Dallas: "Texas Gov. Greg Abbott on Dallas Shooting: 'We Will Overcome Evil With Good,'" "There's evil in this world: Local law enforcement address Dallas shooting," "Dallas protest organizer: A peaceful march that turned 'so evil.'"

¹⁵ This new realism has been theorized by philosophers such as Maurizio Ferraris, Paul Boghossian, Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, Quentin Meillassoux, and Iain Hamilton Grant; by literary critics such as Walter Benn Michaels, Ramón Saldívar, and Umberto Eco; and by writers such as Hanya Yanagihara.

conducive than its predecessor's to political practice, post-postmodernism represents a pragmatic extension of the postmodern project.

One objection to neo-realism argues that to reject relativism is to return to colonial practice, especially since, as Paul Boghossian notes, postmodern antirealism lay the groundwork for social movements such as multiculturalism and post-colonialism by “supply[ing] the philosophical resources with which to protect oppressed cultures from the charge of holding false or unjustified views” (130). Though relativism has enabled social progress, the objection fails to recognize that realism is the precondition not for regressive politics, but rather for political practice in general and that, insofar as politics has never not been practiced, politics has always rejected relativism. The neo-realist character of politics can be attributed to the inability of antirealism to justify the institutional practice of anything. Indeed, to implement any policy within an antirealist paradigm that not only affirms the “equal validity” of all subjective beliefs but also condemns the colonial practice of “subjugating a sovereign people in the name of spreading knowledge” is to contradict the “equal validity” premise of antirealism (Boghossian 2). A political practice that “subjugat[es] a sovereign people” to specific policies violates postmodernism's antirealist social theory and, in so doing, adopts the colonial aspect that such a theory rejects. Insofar as it legislates laws that affect multiple subjects, any political practice must be neo-realist in its rejection of relativism and in its assumption of objective values upon which to justify practice.

Because realism is the precondition for political practice in general and not only for regressive politics, a neo-realist ontology can serve a progressive end. While any institutional practice entails a degree of colonialism, a political practice that promotes progressive values is theoretically more progressive than a practice that, because of its antirealist ontology, cannot be

justifiably implemented. For instance, a postmodern multiculturalism, which can only be a multiculturalism in theory, is less progressive than a post-postmodern multiculturalism, or the institutional practice of multiculturalism, for, though it evades colonial practice, it does not effect social progress. Thus, despite necessarily excluding certain subjective “truths,” the practice of multiculturalism, by virtue of its practice, is more progressive than the non-practice of multiculturalism. If postmodern antirealism lay the ground for a progressive social theory but failed to implement it, then post-postmodern neo-realism provides the means to put this theory into practice, demonstrating its value as a metaphysics for (progressive) political praxis.¹⁶

Despite its objectors, the rejection of relativism gives post-postmodern neo-realism promise as an ontology for ethical and political pragmatism. However, as *A Little Life* and the discursive response to the Sandy Hook shooting suggest, pragmatic action in the post-postmodern world requires more than the rejection of relativism; it also requires an act of belief. One cannot prove that Jude’s abuse and the Sandy Hook shooting were unethical, or that the institutional practice of multiculturalism is ideal; one can only believe it and justify action based on that belief. Of course, the danger of such an attitude is ethical and political colonialism, which

¹⁶ One sees the endorsement of neo-realism by groups such as Feminists United. The group posted a photo to Facebook reading:

OPINIONS CAN BE RACIST
 OPINIONS CAN BE SEXIST
 OPINIONS CAN BE HOMOPHOBIC

stop using “it’s just my opinion” to justify your bigotry.

The group’s subordination of certain opinions to the objective wrongs that they express reflects its rejection of the “equal validity” of opinions and its denunciation of racist, sexist, and homophobic opinions as objectively wrong.

One could also object that the rejection of relativism is also the rejection of equality. However, to make such an objection is to confuse the equalizing nature of relativism with equality as an un-equalized state. Though they both result in statements of equality, relativism justifies the practices of subjects which, in order to be relative, must also be unequal. Thus, relativism poses problems for equality. For instance, if I profess cultural relativism and, as such, regard all cultures as justified in their culturally specific practices, then I must equally respect a culture that does not practice slavery as I respect one that does, even though inequality is integrated into the latter culture’s worldview. Cultural relativism legitimates inequality as a cultural particular to be respected as opposed to a violation of equality. Thus, the rejection of relativism does not necessitate the rejection of equality; it would seem, rather, to better approximate equality. This objection to neo-realism, then, demonstrates the value of realism as an ontology that liberates equality from its relativist trappings.

is why it is important that post-postmodernism heed postmodernism's postcolonial theory. Nonetheless, it is in this tandem relationship that one observes in postmodernism a tendency toward the post-postmodern. As ethical relativism expresses the need for ethics and as progressive social theory expresses the need for practice, the irony of postmodernism is that it adopted an antirealist metaphysics only to express the need to believe.

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