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## **Its core is the negation**

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I intuit two things here: that pluralism seems to continually reveal its relativist core more and more often, and that the revelation of the relativist core will make it increasingly easier for the nihilist position to be stated, with all of its disruptive effects. Conversely, as I have suggested, *merely stating the nihilist position coherently has effects*. I propose that those interested make it their business to *deploy the triplicity*. To which I will immediately add: *there will be stupid and parodic versions of this moment. For some of us this moment will be lived entirely as parody and stupidity*. But there will also be, for some, an opportunity to refine what *our* anarchism has always meant, not as the direction history or society is going in, not as the truth of a tradition, or as an ideal of any sort, but as that which breaks from such orientations in the most absolute sense: the negating prefixes *a-*, *an-*, *anti-*... anti-politics as a provisional orientation, branching out into countless refusals.<sup>13</sup> Our ethics emerges and gives itself to thought only where breaks and refusals clear a sufficient space. We know almost nothing about such spaces, so our ethics might also be defined as the provisional *disorientation* with which we approach our ways of living, the interminable and necessary *skepticism* that characterizes our thinking's motion.

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<sup>13</sup> Speaking for myself, I underestimated the negative in the political sphere, the power of negativity (the attitude towards world, society, spectacle, whatever sets itself up as the All). My temperament led me to emphasize ethical questions about how to live a life of joy, about the places of affirmation (individualism/egoism, the aesthetic sensibility that never lies). I do think one can affirm one's own life, affirm the nothing in it, so to speak, as one resists. Until I realized this, I drifted near this space, but never really knew it. I remained confused about the negative, about the effectiveness of the prefixes *a-*, *an-*, *anti-* ...

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ingly unimaginative discussions, as if to systematically shut down the possibility of such questioning?

What these four consequences add up to is perhaps something on the order of a paradigm shift that some of us are perhaps dimly beginning to perceive. Or perhaps it is much bigger and more terrifying than a paradigm shift could ever be. Rousselle overestimates the importance and centrality of post-anarchism to anarchist theory (and, needless to say, various milieus), and his claim that his theorizing after post-anarchism consolidates the shift from pluralist/relativist post-anarchism, with its reformist and radical liberal tendencies, and a fully nihilist theory expressing the latent destructive content of anarchism, is misplaced. But increasing emphasis on nihilist ideas, and the increasing prevalence of what could be called nihilist measures, is a condition that involves us all to some degree. And we have tried to think it through and respond. The call for an end to government instead of a better, more democratic, more egalitarian form of government is ancient. The call for the abolition of work instead of just, fair, or dignified work is decades old, at least. How many of us no longer criticize competition so as to contrast it with cooperation, but because the victory it offers is laughably meaningless? How many of us have more or less explicitly shifted from advocating a plurality of genders to pondering the conditions for the abolition of gender as such? What to make of the increasing opposition to programmatism<sup>12</sup> and demands in moments of confrontation and occupation?

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<sup>12</sup> A useful term I borrow from *Théorie Communiste*. As they define it: “a theory and practice of class struggle in which the proletariat finds, in its drive toward liberation, the fundamental elements of a future social organisation which become the programme to be realised. This revolution is thus the affirmation of the proletariat, whether as a dictatorship of the proletariat, workers’ councils, the liberation of work, a period of transition, the withering of the state, generalised self-management, or a ‘society of associated producers.’” “Much Ado About Nothing,” in *Endnotes* 1, 155.

a colossal gap, between the implosion-moment of societies like ours and the eternal meaninglessness of value claims and moral codes. Anti-politics might be said only to address the former, while ethical nihilism ultimately invokes the latter. But anti-politics may also reveal ethical nihilism; our willful action may accelerate the ex- or implosion of the world to reveal more of the meaninglessness it has been designed to conceal.

The fourth consequence is that *nihilism is also a condition*. It is not merely those who make it their business to think and act in the world that are living with nihilism. The force of ethical nihilism is not so much in being a position one advocates as in its undermining of others' claims to certainty. If we are able to do this sometimes it is because there are many others who, in a rapidly decomposing society, more or less consciously grasp the hollowness in every code of action. Take this passage from Heidegger as an illustration:

The realm for the essence and event of nihilism is metaphysics itself, always assuming that by "metaphysics" we are not thinking of a doctrine or only of a specialized discipline of philosophy but of the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety ... Metaphysics is the space of history in which it becomes destiny for the supersensory world, ideas, God, moral law, the authority of reason, progress, the happiness of the greatest number, culture, and civilization to forfeit their constructive power and to become void.<sup>11</sup>

Dare I add here that something of this condition was also gestured toward in a few precious texts on postmodernism, texts which raised tremendous questions about their present, and by extension ours, only to be buried in an avalanche of increas-

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<sup>11</sup> "Nietzsche's word: God is Dead," in *Off the Beaten Track*, 165.

## 1

I have always considered my inclination to anarchy to be irreducible to a politics. Anarchist commitments run deeper. They are more intimate, concerning supposedly personal or private matters; but they also overflow the instrumental realm of getting things done. Over time, I have shifted from thinking that anarchist commitments are *more than* a politics to thinking that they are *something other* than a politics. I continue to return to this latter formulation. It requires thinking things through, not just picking a team; it is more difficult to articulate and it is more troubling to our inherited common sense.<sup>1</sup> I do not think I am alone in this. It has occurred to some of us to register this feeling of otherness by calling our anarchist commitments an *ethics*. It has also occurred to some of us to call these commitments *anti-political*. I think these formulations are, for many of us, implicitly interlinked, though hardly interchangeable. What concerns me here in the main is the challenge of what it could mean to live out our commitments as an ethics—though I think the relevance of this thinking to anti-politics will be clarified as well.

I intentionally write ethics, and not morality: as I see it, ethics concerns the flourishing of life, the refinement of desirable ways of life, happy lives. Tiqqun put it well:

When we use the term "ethical" we're never referring to a set of precepts capable of formulation, of rules to observe, of codes to establish. Coming from us, the word "ethical" designates *everything having to do with forms-of-life*. ... No formal ethics is possible. There is only the interplay of forms-of-

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<sup>1</sup> "*Il senso più comune non è il più vero*," wrote the heretic Giordano Bruno: "The most common sense is not the truest." The type of thinking I invoke here takes its distance from what the Mass regards as common sense.

life among themselves, and the protocols of experimentation that guide them locally.<sup>2</sup>

Many of us have been able to reject morality as a form of social control, as the stultifying pressure of the Mass on us, as imposed or self-imposed limitation on what we do and what we are capable of doing. Much the same could be said for any *ethical universalism* which, though emphasizing ways of life and not moral codes or injunctions, tends to homogenize ways of life in the name of a shared good; it does so by surreptitiously presupposing that good and treating it as a natural fact or self-evident transcultural reality. In short, it rejects transcendent morality only to re-introduce it immanently. Our rejection of this single Good went often enough in the direction of *pluralism*: the story went that there were many Goods, many valid or desirable forms of life. This seemed obvious enough, even intuitive, to many of us. The story went well with anarchist principles of decentralization and voluntary association, and resonated with many in the years when anti-globalization rhetoric emphasized Multiculturalism as a practice of resistance and The Local as the site of its practice. It also made sense, or at least was useful, insofar as it was an efficient way to communicate an anarchist perspective to non-anarchists, especially to potential anarchists.

So here we have two different approaches to ethics. One tries to secure access and orientation to a single flourishing form, the criterion being that it be understandable by all: the Good unifies. The other approach claims that there are many such forms, and this plurality itself is the criterion: the Good distributes itself into Goods. Always suspicious of universalizing claims, for many years I sided (more or less comfortably) with the latter, participating in a game of adding

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<sup>2</sup> *Theory of Bloom*, LBC Books version, 144. These phrases condense an entire trajectory of writing on ethics that encompasses Deleuze, Agamben, and Badiou, beginning, naturally, with Spinoza and Nietzsche.

nihilist position into any one practice or set of practices. Destructive practices, partial or absolute, do not follow mechanically from negation. Destruction is not the practical application of a negative theory. I am certainly not saying that destruction is not worthwhile as a practice or set of practices; but I am saying that nihilists by definition reject the overidentification of any practice with their negation of existing moralities and normative approaches to ethics. It is my sense that, once the nihilist position exists as something other than a caricature, the other positions will be increasingly undermined from within and without.

The third consequence is that *ethical nihilism is more than a theory*. It is a way of living and thinking, a form-of-life in which the two are not separate. That Rousselle discusses it only as a theory leaves it to the rest of us to elaborate what else it is, what it looks like, as some say, or how it is practiced. It is my sense that he was able to write this book because of events and situations in his life, in the milieu, in other places. So when I invoke the practical aspect of nihilism, having already said that it cannot be reduced to any practice or set of practices, I mean two things. First, that I mean to underline the unusual tone of all the practices of those that accept some version of the perspective that there is no Outside (to capitalism, civilization, or the existent), or that are profoundly skeptical about any proposed measures to get Outside. Second, that to speak of practices related to ethical nihilism continues to make it seem like a theory that endorses or suggests a course of action, while its interest is precisely that it may not do so. Monsieur Dupont's phrase Do Nothing is relevant here: "Do Nothing... was and remains a provocation. [...] Do Nothing is an immediate reflection of Do Something and its moral apparatus."<sup>10</sup> From weird practices to doing nothing: this is precisely the enigmatic space where anti-politics converges with ethics. Yes, there is a gap, perhaps

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<sup>10</sup> *Nihilist Communism*, 198.

advocate a renewal of society, an improvement of government and management (as self-government, self-management), suggesting pluralist approaches — are likely to refuse to discuss or make explicit the universalist core of their thought. Others might advocate the same practices, while privately sensing or even admitting the hollowness of the values they defend. (One disingenuous result of these private/public conflicts is the unrestrained impulse to act no matter what, as though action can never be damaging or compromised, coupled with claims that it is all an experiment, that we are learning as we go, and so on.) This offers a new perspective on the emergence and significance of second-wave anarchy<sup>9</sup> generally, including post-Left anarchy, green/anti-civilization anarchy, and, I suppose, post-anarchism as well, all of which might now be seen as attempts to analyze and reveal these contradictions, to make explicit the ways in which anarchist discourse was always at war with itself.

The second consequence complements the first: another set of anarchists *confuses ethical pluralism with ethical nihilism*. Here *merely stating the ethical nihilist position coherently has effects*. In this respect I think of those who might have overcome the liberal value-set in politics, advocating destruction of the existent, but continue to drift back to pluralist/relativist perspectives in everyday life and problem-solving due to a lack of imagination. This probably results from unconsciously positing a pluralist society as what comes after a destructive moment, while not consciously framing destructive action as having any particular goal beyond destruction of the existent. I should add here that it would be hasty to collapse the ethical

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<sup>9</sup> For those not familiar with it, this term was introduced by John Moore to refer to anarchist theory and practice after the Situationist International. It might be considered telling that Moore offered the term in a review of a foundational post-anarchist book by Todd May. The review was originally published in *Anarchist Studies*, but I know it from a zine called *Second Wave Anarchy*.

-s to the end of words like people, culture, gender, and so on. Though I was never too concerned to recruit, so that the benefits of communicability were irrelevant to me, this game nevertheless seemed linked to an affirmative gesture, affirmative specifically of difference and plurality in the political sphere. There was always the question of recuperation, i.e. that governmental and other institutions so easily incorporated such pluralism into their functioning as its liberal pole (the conservative pole, which was always present implicitly at least, had to do with norms of governance or rule-following generally). For example, these days university administrations trumpet Multiculturalism louder than anyone else, and Locally Sourced is a hot marketing term. This troubled those of us who took this side, but we countered by emphasizing what could be called raw plurality as opposed to the masticated, digested, and regurgitated version we got from administrators and mouthpieces of all sorts. Choosing pluralism, eagerly or grudgingly, we might have ended up as uneasy relativists; or we might have been working hard to expand the frontiers of liberalism and democracy, there where the word *radical* finds its most docile partners...<sup>3</sup>

I have come to realize, after what I now recognize to be good deal of confusion, if not unconscious hedging, that even as I labored on the limits of pluralism, my thinking was incongruous with that position. My writing and conversations repeatedly gestured in the direction of another position, irreducible to universalism and ever more desperate attempts at pluralism.

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<sup>3</sup> It is also fair to say that, since pluralism is such a key aspect of liberalism, many anarchists simply cling to a kind of radicalized liberalism as their ethics, and their politics, not because of any gaps in their thinking, but because they actually are radical liberals. The problem, of course, is either that they do not recognize it, or that they will not admit it. At least Chomsky, in the 1970 lecture “Government in the Future,” admitted as much, advocating a confluence of radical Marxism and anarchism as “the proper and natural extension of classical liberalism into the era of advanced industrial society.”

It is a *nihilism* that denies the validity of the singular Good at the heart of universalism, as well as the distinct senses of the Good at the heart of pluralism. For nihilists, the only ethical gesture is negative: a rejection of the claims to authority of universalism and pluralism. For us, all such claims are empty, groundless, ultimately meaningless. And this is what was really at stake in distinguishing ethics and morality. My idea of a happy life is not something I reason my way to, or choose, but rather something that manifests senselessly... but I can use my reasoning (my judgment, even!) to help in pushing back, reducing, destroying everything that blocks my way of life.

This report on what must be not only my own trajectory, but also part of the history of the last twenty-five years (more or less for some others) is due in part to some crucial pages in Duane Rousselle's *After Post-Anarchism* that consolidated *this* thought of nihilism for me. Rousselle argues that the nihilist position I have just described has always been the ethical core of anarchism, and that we are now in a moment where this may finally be recognized.

## 2

I want to respond to *After Post-Anarchism* because it contains that significant provocation. Unfortunately, for most of its readers, this book cannot but be an exotic object. To whatever degree it discusses familiar ideas or even lived situations, it does so through arcane routes. Yes, it is difficult reading; but it is not by engaging with what is most difficult in it that readers will happen upon the few remarkable insights that it contains. Rousselle's writing is difficult because of the density of his references and because of an unfortunate penchant for wordiness and digression. Although I would be the last to say that every idea articulated in theoretical or abstract terms can also be phrased in ordinary, so-called accessible language, I sus-

us as lessons—logical lessons about what anarchy means. Its core is the negation.

## 4

Such logical lessons are useful, arguably necessary, if we want to discard hope at this juncture and think with more sobriety. Most of the thinking from this perspective remains to be done. It concerns the conjunctions and disjunctions between several senses of nihilism. First, there are those most familiar in the milieu as positions: nihilist anarchy and nihilist communism. Second, there is nihilism as a theoretical concern in other writers, from Jacobi to Baudrillard. Lastly, there is the diagnostic sense of nihilism inherited from Nietzsche. Articulating these with the ethical nihilism Rousselle discovers/invents at the core of anarchism will be a complicated task, so I will limit myself here to an enumeration of provisional consequences stemming from what I have written so far. I offer these consequences as a relay from *After Post-Anarchism*'s provocations to the thinking that remains to be done: to make it possible, to prepare it as best I know how. The first two consequences suggest how we might deploy the triplicity to understand and critique contemporary anarchist approaches. The latter two concern the broader relevance and context for ethical nihilism, setting out from the anarchist context.

The first consequence is that it is now clear that *many contemporary anarchists confusedly combine ethical universalism with ethical pluralism; and ethical universalism with ethical nihilism*. In a society like ours, one whose ideal is supposedly liberal democracy, we should expect pluralist language to be the most likely one in which radicals will offer their analysis and proposals. Community organizing, consciousness-raising, and so on, have obvious links to liberalism and are at best its radical forms. As a result, moralistic types — those who publically



the case, the nihilist position will be known in that it exposes the differend between itself and the others, and *between the others and themselves*.

This is consistent with the basic formulation of nihilism as a negative ethics. Actions taken in its name are always provisional: to reiterate from *Theory of Bloom*, all we have and all we know is “the interplay of forms-of-life” and “the protocols of experimentation that guide them.” No one knows what the world would be like if it were populated with nihilists alone! Following the previously cited sentence on the negativity at the core of the tradition, Rousselle cites one of his sources, the moral philosopher J.L. Mackie:

[W]hat I have called moral scepticism is a negative doctrine, not a positive one: it says what there isn't, not what there is. It says that there do not exist entities or relations of a certain kind, objective values or requirements, which many people have believed to exist. If [this] position is to be at all plausible, [it] must give some account of how other people have fallen into what [it] regards as an error, and this account will have to include some positive suggestions about how values fail to be objective, about what has been mistaken for, or has led to false beliefs about, objective values. But this will be a development of [the] theory, not its core: its core is the negation. (99)

In my language, the negation corresponds to ethics as a way of life; the account of error, to what I call a counter-rhetoric. I praise Rousselle, then, because he contributed to a defense of what is negative in anarchism, while also hinting at a defense of negativity as such. He makes space for us to read passages such as the one by Mackie, above, creatively, offering them to

pect that much of what I find valuable in *After Post-Anarchism* can indeed be restated otherwise. I intend to do so here. As I noted, this aspect of *After Post-Anarchism* struck me as an unusually clear formulation of thoughts I had been struggling to express for years (among other places, in the pages of this magazine). So, instead of a broader critique of post-anarchism (which Rousselle has a knack for folding back into a plea for its relevance) I will limit myself to some brief remarks about his misprision of the respective roles of theory and practice.<sup>4</sup>

Post-anarchism receives numerous formulations in this book, but really only two definitions. The first is simply that it is a “discursive strategy” (31): not so much a theory as the outcome of ongoing discussions and debates in a theoretical space where anarchism, post-structuralism, and new social movements (as theorized by their participants and outsiders) intersect. In this respect I could make many objections or clarifications, but I will simply note that for such investigations to proceed as Rousselle intends, anarchism (as “classical anarchism,” 4 and *passim*) must be interpreted as “anarchist philosophy,” sometimes “traditional anarchist philosophy” (39 and *passim*).<sup>5</sup> The second definition, which follows from the first but is more provocative, is that post-anarchism “is simply *anarchism* folded back onto itself” (136). For Rousselle this means an anarchic questioning of the ethical basis of anar-

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<sup>4</sup> I do not intend to attack what is all too easy to criticize in a book framed as an intervention into post-anarchism, a topic that I am not concerned with, and which I am sure is less than popular with the readership of *AJODA*. I happily leave the task of settling the accounts of this book with the proponents and opponents of post-anarchism to those who find it worthwhile. I similarly leave to one side the discussion of the relation of Georges Bataille's ideas to ethical nihilism in the book's final chapter.

<sup>5</sup> Rousselle only makes occasional references to “classical” anarchists other than Kropotkin, who is his major case study. I take it this is because Kropotkin is thought of as the most explicitly ethical of the original anarchists, and also because he has been the object of sustained attention among post-anarchists.

chism, a search for the anarchy in anarchism; he later specifies his own version of this folding in terms of the distinction between manifest and latent contents of statements.

Here I can underline both the weakness and the promise of Rousselle's approach. Whatever the silliness of the term post-anarchism, I think the second definition's project of questioning, of folding back reflexively, is of interest to any anarchist who does not take their position on questions of morality and ethics (or anything else, for that matter) for granted. When he is pursuing this sort of questioning, Rousselle is at his strongest. When he is treating the anarchist tradition interchangeably as a series of historical figures, events, practices, etc. and as the discursive or conceptual framing that can be abstracted from them ("anarchist philosophy"), he is at his weakest. He repeatedly falls into the intellectualist trap of describing actions as the result of pre-existing theoretical attitudes. "Can we at least provisionally admit," he asks rhetorically, "that anarchism is not a tradition of canonical thinkers but one of canonical practices based on a canonical selection of ethical premises?" (129). Freeing himself from the idea of an anarchist movement set into motion by a bearded man's intellect, he remains on the side of the intellect by presupposing of a pre-existing set of premises on which practices are "based" and from which they derive their status as "canonical."

One more critical remark about the weakness in this approach. Rousselle describes post-anarchism in a third way, and this one is not so much a definition as an illustration. He writes that post-anarchism is the "new paradigm" (126) of anarchist thought: "The paradigm shift... that made its way into the anarchist discourse, as 'post-anarchism,' allowed for the realization and elucidation of the ethical component of traditional anarchist philosophy" (129). He is so zealous in his promotion of this term that several times in his book he annexes authors who explicitly reject the term, such as Uri Gordon and Gabriel Kuhn, to the cause. This all seems to me

Rousselle suggests that, although most post-anarchists thought they were improving upon anarchism or developing its intuitions, they were in fact rendering it more docile, because more akin to liberal ideals; he, on the other hand, has revealed its nihilist core, its true and original inclination to anarchy. The problem now becomes: when anarchists disavow this nihilist core, opting for some version of relativism (or universalism!), how do we answer them? For the same reasons that I do not take Kropotkin's or Bakunin's manifest ideas as my guides, I do not take what analysis might reveal as their latent content as my guide. And if I do not find this kind of argumentation compelling, why would I use it on another? This is where Rousselle's intellectualist assumptions undercut the force of his claims. I do think, however, that the ethical nihilist position is at the core of most anarchist discourse and practice, as its latent content. That is, I think he is basically right, *not specifically about so-called classical anarchism, but, proximately and for the most part, about anarchists*. Rousselle's psychoanalytically inspired method of reading texts should be transformed into a rhetoric, or rather a counter-rhetoric, that can intervene in the present more directly. What he does with old texts, others might be able to do with people, groups, and contemporary texts. But how and when to use this counter-rhetoric? The least I can say is that I am not in the business of convincing anyone about what they really think. I may well keep my analysis to myself, or state it in resignation of being misunderstood; or I may use it to attack. Whatever

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archists in their reconstruction of "classical anarchism." Many egoists, for example, explicitly stated what Rousselle claims can only be grasped as a latent content (i.e. what appears only when explicit statements are analyzed). The best one can say about Rousselle's analysis in this regard is that it destabilizes what many consider to be the center and the margins of the anarchist tradition, or canon. But it does leave one wondering why he discusses Kropotkin at such length instead of Stirner or Novatore, for example, who are referenced only in passing. Is there something at stake for him in emphasizing ethical nihilism as a latent content as opposed to a manifest one?

Anarchists are against any other structures of representation and power analogous to those at work in the State and Church  
*implies...*

Anarchists are against any structure of representation and power  
*implies...*

Anarchists are against all authority, all representation  
*implies...*

Anarchists are against ...<sup>7</sup>

Now, most anarchists will drop off at some point in the chain of implication, judging it to have gone too far past what they regard as common sense. (Our enemies might be less inclined to think they have gone too far.) What does this mean? Roughly speaking, that under analysis the initial emphases on opposition to state or religious authority give way to an unbounded hostility to all authority; that the opposition to political representation opens onto being against all representation; and that the critique of the unfoundedness of existing moral codes concludes in a sense of the ungroundedness of all morality. And they do so in two senses: historically, as the overall tendency of anarchism has sufficient time to develop (that it will be repressed and denied by its adherents as well as enemies is not evidence against this); and psychologically or subjectively, since this overall tendency is also an intimate matter in the life of individuals, part of the unconscious of its first and present proponents (and so analogous claims about repression by adherents and enemies most certainly apply).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This is my way of rewriting the contrast between manifest and latent content that Rousselle derives from Freud. Rousselle's way of explicating this has but two statements, one showing the latent content of the other through elimination. Mine has more to do with pushing a thought to its limit. They converge in that, for this to happen, thinking has to engage with the unthought: ...

<sup>8</sup> This is obviously where one should reiterate the argument made by Shawn Wilbur and Jesse Cohn against the first wave of post-anarchists: they had built their collective case on a caricaturesque reduction of historical an-

to be in bad taste. There is also a more profound problem at stake: paradigm shifts do not happen because one says they do. The declarative, performative wishes evidenced whenever Rousselle uses the language of advancement or progress, as though what was at stake here was a science, tell us much about his intentions, but always fall flat in terms of convincingness. Even if there is a paradigm shift at work in anarchist theory (or practice!), there is no reason to consider the shift as an improvement. We are probably just catching up to an increasingly complex, chaotic, and uncontrollable world. So I fault him for misunderstanding what a paradigm shift is, for wildly exaggerating the overall importance of post-anarchism, and for framing anarchism too abstractly as an inchoate philosophy. Nevertheless, returning to my principal reasons for writing this essay, I will now praise Rousselle, for some of what he writes about ethics.

### 3

Early in *After Post-Anarchism* Rousselle states that, answering what he calls "the question of place" (roughly, on what grounds do you make an ethical claim?) there are three types of responses. There are universalist theories, which state that "there is a shared objective essence that grounds all normative principles irrespective of the stated values of independently situated subjects or social groups" (41). This would include most religiously grounded moralities, as well as appeals to human nature. Most such theories are absolutist, but they need not all be so; utilitarianism is an example of a "normative theory that proposes that the correct solution is the one that provides the greatest good to the majority of the population." The second set of theories, which corresponds to what I called pluralism in the opening section, is what Rousselle refers to as ethical relativism. "Relativists believe that social groups do indeed differ

in their respective ethical value systems and that each respective system constitutes a place of ethical discourse”(43). That is, there are different systems (of belief, culture, custom, etc.) that may ground morals. Again, there is an interesting subset, a limit-case: “At the limit of relativist ethics is the belief that the unique subject is the place from which ethical principles are thought to arise”(43). This corresponds to most types of individualism.

The provocation I am underlining in Rousselle’s book is that, rather than try once more to save pluralism by pushing it farther into a parodic relativism, he pursues what he calls *ethical nihilism*. His first stab at a definition runs: “ethical nihilism is the belief that ethical truths, if they can be said to exist at all, derive from the paradoxical non-place within the heart of any place” (43). That is, nihilism denies the ground, or at least the grounding or claim to grounding, in ethical universalism and pluralism. “Nihilists seek to discredit and/or interrupt all universalist and relativist responses to the question of place [...] nihilists are critics of all that currently exists and they raise this critique against all such one-sided foundations and systems” (44–45). Obviously, this completes the triplicity with which I began this essay.

It is from this triplicity that Rousselle develops his analysis of ethics in relation to anarchism. Rather than argue about existing moral codes or ethical paths, Rousselle suggests that another position has so far remained largely undiscussed: the nihilist one that rejects the authority or normativity of such argumentation. He states that post-anarchists, so far, have approached “classical anarchism” as a universalism (generally based on human nature) and sought to redistribute its ethical impetus in the direction of relativism. What Rousselle seeks to do, by contrast, is to make explicit the implicit core of classical anarchism; and that core, according to him, is ultimately nihilist. “One must therefore seek to remain consistent with the latent force rather than the manifest structure of anarchist

ethics, for there is a negativity that is at the very core of the anarchist tradition” (98–99). Centering his discussion on Kropotkin, Rousselle claims that while Kropotkin’s manifest ethics was clearly universalist (grounded on an appeal to human nature), his latent ethics was nihilist. “If it can be demonstrated that Kropotkin’s system of ‘mutual aid’ also called for the restriction of the free movement of the individual then it can also be argued that his work, like much of traditional anarchist philosophy, was always at war with itself” (146).<sup>6</sup> The ethical nihilism is revealed by chipping away at the manifest content of the old saws, serially revealing the conflicts they conceal, the latent content that was always implied in them:

Anarchists are against the State and Church  
*implies...*

Anarchists are against the structures of representation and power at work in the State and Church  
*implies...*

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<sup>6</sup> Rousselle frames this claim as a claim about theory, and the conditions under which theories are formulated. He does not frame this as a historical argument, although the idea of conditions obviously implies theory. For example, he references in passing the shared approach of the Russian Nihilists and Kropotkin in a discussion of an article by John Slatter: “Slatter took Kropotkin at his word when he argued that ‘[anarchists must] bend the knee to no authority whatsoever, however respected [...] accept no principle so long as it is unestablished by reason’ (Kropotkin as quoted in Slatter, 261). Here, however, Kropotkin’s rationalism was maintained but only to reveal a useful parallel: “The appeal to reason rather than to tradition or custom in moral matters is one made earlier in Russian intellectual history by the so-called ‘nihilists’” (ibid.). Like Kropotkin, the Russian ‘nihilists’ (or ‘The New People’, as they were called) adopted a rationalist/positivist discourse as a way to achieve a distance from the authority of the church and consequently from metaphysical philosophies. The meta-ethics of Kropotkin’s work ... thus reveals, not ‘mutual aid,’ but a tireless negativity akin to the spirit of the Russian nihilists: ‘[the anarchist must] fight against existing society with its upside-down morality and look forward to the day when it would be no more’ (Kropotkin as cited by Slatter, ibid)” (146–147).