Part I

“IT’S ALL ONE GHETTO, MAN … A GIANT GUTTER IN OUTER SPACE”

Pessimism and Anti-natalism
Why Life Rather than Death?
Answers from Rustin Cohle and Arthur Schopenhauer

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Rustin Cohle, the protagonist of the first season of True Detective, declares that he is “in philosophical terms, a pessimist.” Before we are introduced to him, Rust has already experienced the terrible loss of his two-year-old daughter and the painful dissolution of his marriage. His employment confronts him daily with the horrors of human conduct, where the “law of the stronger” reigns and the strong and sadistic exploit the weak and vulnerable. Throughout season one, we see Rust struggling to find the best, truest response to all this seemingly endemic and unredeemed suffering.

Rust thinks that human consciousness is a “tragic misstep in nature.” The doctrine of “pessimism” espoused by Rust is remarkably similar to the view adumbrated by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), who holds that (1) conscious life (both human and nonhuman animal) involves a tremendous amount of suffering that is essentially built into the structure of the world and (2) there is no Creator (providential or otherwise) to redeem all of this suffering, by, say, punishing the wicked and rewarding the good.

Arthur Schopenhauer’s Pessimism

Schopenhauer is just as attuned as Rust to the tremendous amount of evil in the world, caused for the most part by other human...
beings. Whereas the “true detective” is nauseated and jaded by the sadistic acts of bayou killers who prey mostly on innocent girls and young women, Schopenhauer is nauseated and jaded by more institutional sources of human suffering in nineteenth-century Europe and the United States that spring largely from pervasive human egoism and, to a lesser but not insignificant extent, malice:

The chief source of the most serious evils affecting man is man himself; *homo homini lupus*. He who keeps this last fact clearly in view beholds the world as a hell, surpassing that of Dante by the fact that one man must be the devil of another. ... How man deals with man is seen, for example, in Negro slavery, the ultimate object of which is sugar and coffee. However, we need not go so far; to enter at the age of five a cotton-spinning or other factory, and from then on to sit there every day first ten, then twelve and finally fourteen hours, and perform the same mechanical work, is to purchase dearly the pleasure of drawing breath. But this is the fate of millions, and many more millions have an analogous fate.2

Additionally, Schopenhauer focuses on the suffering of nonhuman animals at the hands of human beings who view them as mere instruments for their use:

Because ... Christian morals give no consideration to animals, they are at once free as birds in philosophical morals too, they are mere “things”, mere *means* to whatever ends you like, as for instance vivisection, hunting with hounds, bull-fighting, racing, whipping to death in front of an immovable stone-cart and the like.3

**Why Not Suicide?**

Given this grim view of the human condition, it makes sense to raise the question of suicide: Why not put an end to one’s life, in order to escape from this ultimately senseless vale of tears? Throughout *True Detective*, Rust struggles with “letting go” and, regarding the last episode of season one, “Form and Void,” the creator, Nic Pizzolatto, explains that the episode “represents the dilemma Rust walked for some time: why life rather than the opposite?”4 Rust thinks that our “programming”
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Why Life Rather Than Death? (in Schopenhauer’s terms, the “will-to-live”) “gets us out of bed in the morning” but that it would be better, all things considered, to “deny our programming” and walk ourselves “hand in hand into extinction” (“The Long Bright Dark”). Thus, Rust enunciates his in principle embrace of suicide.

In this positive attitude toward suicide, Rust actually parts ways with Schopenhauer, which is surprising since the philosopher is one of the most famous pessimists in the history of Western thought. In fact, Schopenhauer regarded suicide as a “futile and foolish act.” What accounts for this divergence?

Schopenhauer’s Answer

Schopenhauer does not discourage suicide out of philosophical optimism: he doesn’t think that this is the best of all possible worlds, as Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) does; neither does he believe that the world must get better because of a necessary rational structure, as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) holds; nor that the world is a self-justifying divine cause, as Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) argues. Also, he doesn’t see life as a gift, to be thankfully accepted. Schopenhauer is convinced that the world is and will always be full of unredeemed suffering, for nature involves an internecine struggle for existence rather than a “peaceable kingdom” of animals living largely in harmony. And he is convinced that much of this suffering will go uncompensated in this life, as the sources of suffering seem to outweigh the sources of happiness and tranquility. Above all, he is an uncompromising atheist who holds that there is no providential God to redeem all of this suffering in an afterlife.

It might be surprising, then, that Schopenhauer thinks suicide is a “futile and foolish act.” Perhaps, like Rust, Schopenhauer should embrace suicide. For the nature of the will-to-live is ultimately blind, senseless striving and suffering for no particular end. Yet the reason Schopenhauer rejects suicide is that suicide does not negate but rather affirms the will-to-live, for the person who would die by suicide desires life; it’s just that the individual is unsatisfied with the conditions on offer for their particular life. Within this logic, suicide is foolish because it prevents a person from attaining the highest wisdom and the true inner peace that would come from
actual renunciation of the will-to-live. Thus, Schopenhauer writes, suicide is “an act of will” through which “the individual will abolishes the body … before suffering can break it.” He thereby likens a suicidal person to a sick person who “having started undergoing a painful operation that could cure him completely, does not allow it to be completed and would rather stay sick.”⁶ There is only one remarkable exception to his overall view on suicide: death by voluntary starvation. At the highest levels of asceticism, the negation of the will-to-live can attain such a point where “even the will needed to maintain the vegetative functions of the body through nutrition can fall away.”⁷

**Rust’s Answer**

Returning to *True Detective*, we see that Rust struggles with many of the same issues that occupy Schopenhauer. For instance, though Rust embraces pessimism and resignationist tendencies, as evidenced by his rather ascetic lifestyle and *in principle* embrace of suicide, Rust does not actually resign himself from life. He is, after all, the eponymous “true detective” and throws himself assiduously into the task of solving the ritualistic rapes and murders and bringing the perpetrators to justice.

So what really motivates Rust to spend most of his waking life (and he doesn’t seem to sleep all that much) attempting to solve these crimes? Is it the intellectual puzzle? Is it compassion for the victims and potential new victims? Is it a thirst for justice?

At times it seems that it is merely the intellectual challenge that motivates Rust. This recalls Schopenhauer’s own expressed reason to devote himself to philosophy: “Life is an unpleasant business; I have resolved to spend it reflecting upon it.”⁸ Yet, what preoccupies Rust’s mind and takes up a good bit of wall space in his barely furnished apartment is reflection with a *specific practical aim*—namely, to solve the crimes in order to prevent future victims and to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Thus, Rust seems not just motivated by the intellectual puzzle but also by a morality of compassion and justice. After all, his aim is not merely to solve the crimes but also to apprehend or otherwise stop the perpetrators. Further, these moral motives get to the heart of Rust’s espousal of pessimism in the first place, for he is—unlike
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how Marty often seems — acutely sensitive to the sufferings of others and — again, unlike Marty but in line with Schopenhauer — rejects any theological story of redemption for all of this suffering.

What I want to suggest, then, is that Rust’s own practice belies his stated pessimistic views. It is not just “programming” — the will-to-live, egoistic striving — that gets Rust out of bed in the morning; rather, it is the sense that if there is to be any kind of redemption it has to be earthly, in the form of prevention or alleviation of suffering, and in bringing criminals to justice.

Schopenhauer on Compassion

Surprisingly, Schopenhauer at certain points in his writings seems to recommend the general, compassionate, and justice-seeking path that Rust takes in *True Detective*. Especially in his underappreciated essay “On the Basis of Morality,” Schopenhauer recommends acts of justice and loving-kindness in response to the myriad sources of misery. For example, he praises the British nation’s spending “up to 20 million pounds” to buy the freedom of slaves in America. He also champions the proliferation of animal protection societies in Continental Europe, recommending English newspaper reports to address “the associations against the torture of animals now established in Germany, so that they see how one must attack the issue if anything is to come of it” and he acknowledges “the praiseworthy zeal of Councillor Perner in Munich who has devoted himself entirely to this branch of beneficence and spread the initiative for it throughout the whole of Germany.”

Finally, Schopenhauer recognizes that the work of civic organizations, especially in securing legal change, can bring about real moral change and reduce suffering. Again, with respect to the animal protection movement and laws against animal cruelty, Schopenhauer writes, “Everything adduced here gives evidence that the moral chord in question … is gradually beginning to sound in the occidental world.”

Schopenhauer opposes all forms of suicide, except the redeeming ascetic one, because suicide robs a person of the highest wisdom regarding the apparent futility of life. However, the hopeful ethics of compassion that Schopenhauer also espouses looks like
a second-rate option. On the traditional reading of Schopenhauer, he holds that it is better to go beyond willing and therefore beyond compassion as well to a real renunciation of the will-to-live, if one can. Only in renunciation is the patient truly cured of the rather absurd scourge that is the will-to-live. Yet, the rationality of the choice between compassionate action, on the one hand (action that tries to improve the world), and resignation, on the other (inaction that constitutes a redemption from the world), hinges on whether there are good grounds for hope.

Rust's Doubt

Returning to True Detective, we see Rust doubt whether there are good grounds for hope. The task of preventing and alleviating suffering as well as bringing a measure of justice into the world is onerous. It also threatens to seem futile given the large numbers of murders and disappearances, and the rampant cruelty and degradation inflicted especially upon children, teenage girls, and women throughout the series. This sense of futility, it seems, overtakes Rust in the interim between “solving” the first crime introduced in the show and the second spate of similar murders.

During this hiatus, Rust has indeed opted for resignation as a response to pessimism. Although he does not have the constitution for outright suicide—as he says to Marty—he is nonetheless doing a pretty good job of drinking himself to death. He has essentially retreated from the world into a dark bar where he can engage in almost nonstop anesthetization through the bottle, until a spate of new, similar murders awakens him from his resignationist slumber, resparking his intellectual curiosity as well as his compassion and sense of justice.

But it takes the final, spooky, and frankly nauseating confrontation with evil incarnate, in the form of the “Yellow King,” to show Rust a legitimate path to the affirmation of life, as opposed to what he sees as an intellectually dishonest, optimistic, theological route. After surviving the bizarre melee and shutting down the activities of this serial killer, Rust gains a sense that perhaps his thoroughgoing pessimism is, at bottom, unwarranted. Despite the fact of tremendous suffering and injustice in the world, there are, nonetheless, nontrivial victories for compassion and justice.
Additionally, Marty’s quasi-reconciliation with his family shows Rust that a measure of forgiveness and understanding can be attained even after a long history of strained relationships. Rust also finds that he can take some comfort in knowing that his daughter did not suffer at the end of her short life.

**Rust’s Conversion**

There are intimations of an afterlife in the final scene of the first season, and some sublime meditations on the starry night sky, to be sure, but in the end it does not seem that Rust’s conversion is theological in nature. Rather, I interpret his final turn as resulting from the realization that some degree of affirmation is warranted by the empirical evidence. In other words, he realizes that thoroughgoing pessimism and resignation from life is not an intellectually honest stance to take. In light of his epistemic shift, he might even come to the view that his former resignation might be positively immoral, but Rust’s character arc, with the series, ends only with the former, more ecumenical realization.

So, Rust’s character throughout the series goes from (1) self-described jaded, wannabe-suicidal pessimist who belies his own self-understanding by energetically fighting crime to (2) one who really embraces that self-description, resigns from life, and aims to drink himself to death to (3) the cautious affirmer of life through compassionate engagement with the world. Rust finds some grounds for hope, and he chooses to continue on the path of compassion and justice, the path to try to improve the world. This prompts the question of whether he ever really embraced suicide in principle, and just lacked the constitution to pull it off, or whether, like Schopenhauer, he perhaps always found the intellectual grounds for such a radical decision to be shaky. At the very least, we can conclude that, as the eponymous “true detective,” he was duty-bound to pursue the evidence—evidence for hope or lack thereof—wherever it would lead.

**Notes**

1. An earlier version of this chapter originally appeared online at *The Critique*. 


7. Ibid., 428.


9. Ibid., 218.

10. Ibid., fn. 230.

11. Ibid., 231.