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[Essay]

True Detective: Pessimism, Buddhism or Philosophy?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to raise two questions. The first question is: How is pessimism related to Buddhism (and vice versa)? The second question is: What relation does an immanent philosophy have to pessimism and Buddhism, if any? Using *True Detective*, an American television crime drama, as my point of departure, first I will outline some of the likenesses between Buddhism and pessimism. At the same time, I will show how the conduct of one of the main characters in *True Detective* resembles the paths of Buddhism and pessimism, even though he is ethical in a strictly non-pessimistic and non-Buddhist fashion. Last, I will try to place these findings in perspective through the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's thoughts. Hereby, I hope to illustrate that joy, not suffering, is basic to human existence, and how human beings may overcome a spiritual pessimism.

“Then start asking the right fucking questions.” – Rust Cohle, *True Detective*

1. Introduction

True Detective is an American television crime drama created and written by Nic Pizzolatto. It tells the story of the detectives Marty Hart and Rust Cohle, partners in Louisiana's Crime Investigation Division, who are assigned to solve a mysterious occult murder in 1995. Apparently, they solve the case. However, 17 years later, in 2012, the two of them are interviewed by two other detectives because a similar murder has happened. If Cohle and Hart did not catch the murderer, new questions are needed.

The mystery is not solved.

The sociologist Luc Boltanski describes a mystery as “a singularity” that “leaves a kind of scratch on the seamless fabric of reality.”¹

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¹ Boltanski (2014), p. 3. The point of the inquiry, according to Boltanski, is to turn the irrational into something rational – “everything falls back into place” (p. 9). I do not share the author's dichotomy between chaos and order, nor do I believe that reality is socially constructed. On the contrary, while I (or anyone else) try to construct or produce a meaning, I am constantly being constructed by what happens, i.e., the encounter gradually produces more reality when it actualizes certain as-yet-unknown potentials.

The “scratch” that I will focus on in this essay, however, is not “Who did it?” (i.e., the murder). Instead, I will pay attention to the development of one of the characters, detective Cohle. He describes himself in the following manner: “I’d consider myself a realist, all right? But in philosophical terms, I’m what’s called a pessimist.”²

Yet, I will show that Cohle transgresses pessimism (and Buddhism) when he gradually turns into an immanent philosopher. He becomes worthy of what has happened by doing his work. “Life’s barely long enough to get good at one thing. So be careful what you get good at,” he says.³ He detects. His continual investigation of the murder, his ongoing questioning (a 17-year process), is at the same time an examination of a form of life. He matures as a detective and turns into a true detective, i.e., a philosopher.

What is mysterious in *True Detective*, therefore, is that a detective on a televised crime drama philosophizes.

2. Premises

In the present work, philosophy is understood as an *immanent practice*, which is found in, e.g., the work of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. This practice is contrary to a philosophy that aims at something transcendental – beyond or above life. “[T]hought is creation, not will to truth,” write Deleuze and Guattari.⁴

Seen in this light, Buddhism is a religion in the sense that it operates with trans-empirical states of being: the divine or a God. “God is,” a Buddhist Dzogchen teacher says.⁵ A Buddhist is “one who has woken up”⁶ or one who experiences an “enlightened consciousness.”⁷ The thinking and practices in Buddhism, therefore, are controlled by will to truth, i.e., by the demands of this “God” or the reality of an “enlightened consciousness.” Buddhism, of course, is a complex and diverse religious and philosophical system. It can be divided into three broad traditions: “1. The Theraváda tradition of Sri Lanka and South-East

² *True Detective*, episode 1.

³ *True Detective*, episode 7.

⁴ Deleuze & Guattari (1994), p. 54.

⁵ Bertelsen (2013), p. 32. Dzogchen is described as “the pinnacle” of the old Vajrayana Buddhism and is translated as “utter totality” or “great perfection”; see Dechen & Chogyam (2002), p. 1.

⁶ Gethin (1998), p. 8.

⁷ Bertelsen (2013), p. 3.

Asia, also sometimes referred to as ‘southern’ Buddhism... 2. The East Asian tradition of China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, also sometimes referred to as ‘eastern’ Buddhism... 3. The Tibetan tradition, also sometimes referred to as ‘northern’ Buddhism.”⁸ In this essay, however, I refer to the Tibetan tradition when I talk about Buddhism – more specifically the Dzogchen teaching of Buddhism.

In contrast, a pessimist claims that suffering is the “immediate object of our life ... evil is precisely that which is positive,” as Arthur Schopenhauer writes. He continues, “... all happiness and satisfaction, is negative, that is, the mere elimination of a desire and the ending of a pain.”⁹ Happiness is the absence of the positive element, i.e., pain. Thus, pessimism corresponds with Buddhism, since the latter also claims that life is suffering.

“*Buddhism is pessimism,*” writes Thomas Ligotti.¹⁰ Which, of course, means that pessimism is a kind of religion, and vice versa. The two ideas are debating, or battling with, one another. And the two ideas are equally present in *True Detective*. However, although pessimism is not a religion per se, it nevertheless postulates no less than religious practices, e.g., when Ligotti claims that we feel “... shortchanged if there is nothing else for us than to survive, reproduce, and die. We want there to be more to it than that, or to think there is. This is a tragedy.”¹¹ It is.

The tragedy is where the pessimist and the Buddhist part. The Buddhist believes that one can find happiness if one follows the teaching of the Buddha; the pessimist does not share such a belief. So, for the Buddhist, it may be seen as a tragedy that the pessimist deprives him- or herself of the opportunity of experiencing a higher form of being.

Regardless the similarities and differences, I question the underlying premises of both Buddhism and pessimism: whether surviving, reproducing and dying cannot be enough; whether the real is given or not, e.g., as a theology or as an unchangeable reality; whether all human beings really seek a predefined meaning; whether the main object of life really is suffering per se – and, if so, whether this suffering might be overcome by referring to a higher form of reality.

We are dealing with postulates. For a simple example, why should the

⁸ Gethin (1998), pp. 1-2.

⁹ Schopenhauer (2004), pp. 41-42.

¹⁰ Ligotti (2010), p. 130 (italics in original).

¹¹ Ligotti (2010), p. 28.

feeling of pain and suffering be more authentic than the feelings of joy and happiness?

The problem is metaphysical. My thesis is that a religion (or a rigid pessimistic philosophy), in general, is less receptive, less open; that it encourages less vulnerability and awareness, because of its embedded “will to truth.” A philosopher, or even a true detective, would say, “We write only at the frontiers of our knowledge, at the border which separates our knowledge from our ignorance and transforms the one into the other.”¹² In other words, philosophy as presented here becomes an a posteriori test of what is in the midst of coming into being.

Last, let me emphasize that Deleuze is not chosen because he is a philosophical referee; neither should he become yet another ideal. Rather, he is chosen because his way of thinking addresses some of the flaws in pessimism and Buddhism. This does not necessarily mean that I disagree completely with these ideas, or that parts of them are not very inspiring. It only means that I find parts of them less convincing philosophically.

3. True Questioning

In *True Detective*, the affinity between the foundations of pessimism and Buddhism is apparent. I already mentioned how Cohle describes himself as a pessimist. At the very end of the eight-episode serial, he experiences death as pure love, which could be seen as an example of “higher consciousness.”

I quote in extenso:

There was a moment, I know, when, I was under in the dark, that something... whatever I'd been reduced to, not even consciousness, just a vague awareness in the dark. I could feel my definitions fading. And beneath that darkness there was another kind – it was ... it was deeper, warm, like a substance. I could feel, man, and I knew, I knew my daughter waited for me, there. So clear. I could feel her. I could feel ... I could feel a piece of my ... my pop, too. It was like I was a part of everything that I ever loved, and we were all ... the three of us, just fading out. And all I had to do was let go – and I did. I said, “Darkness, yeah,

¹² Deleuze (2004), p. xx.

yeah.” And I disappeared. But I could ... I could still feel her love there, even more than before. Nothing ... nothing but that love.¹³

In Buddhism, there is a strong relationship between spiritual practice and the death process. One changes dimension – i.e., consciousness – when one dies. Thereby it is possible to experience “rigpa,” i.e., “immediate awareness” or “pure awareness.”¹⁴

Is it pure awareness that Cohle experiences when he talks about “nothing but that love”?

Regardless of the answer, Cohle’s experience stands in stark contrast to his explicit pessimism 17 years earlier, when he suggests that maybe human beings should “stop reproducing, walk hand in hand into extinction.”¹⁵ (I will get back to this idea of antinatalism later. For the moment, I only wish to address the change or transformation of Cohle.)

Buddhism and pessimism both claim that suffering is basic to human existence. Both are critical towards consciousness, although Buddhism talks about a “higher” form of consciousness that releases our human existence from suffering, basically because it gets access to the source of love, i.e., “great perfection.” As one teacher writes, “[I]t undeniably looks as if the meaning of human life consists of two things: love and higher consciousness. And those two are essentially one and the same.”¹⁶ A higher consciousness is described as a “seeing, when you were blind before. A wakefulness, when you were asleep before. A spiritual perspective, when you only perceived the materialistic before.”¹⁷

This can easily be applied to Cohle’s experience, although a previous version of detective Cohle would only add:

¹³ *True Detective*, episode 8.

¹⁴ Bertelsen, (2013), pp. 98-109; Bertelsen (2008), p. 147.

¹⁵ *True Detective*, episode 1.

¹⁶ Bertelsen (2013), p. 57. See also p. 3, where it says, “enlightened consciousness is one with the source of love.”

¹⁷ Bertelsen (2013), p. 64. “The spiritual process is a slow awakening” (p. 91). The approach resembles the metaphor of Plato’s cave. Everyone, in Dzogchen, is born with the capacity or potential to see, but one only sees through hard work. Similar, Plato talked about moving from a life lived in shadow towards a true and ideal world of perfection. However, for Plato, not all human beings seem to be capable of climbing out of the cave. Similar, both uses dualistic concepts, e.g., spirituality versus materiality – this can, at least from a Dzogchen point of view, be seen as a paradox, because it aims at overcoming dualism. The practice tends to become either-or, i.e., either materialism or higher consciousness.

The ontological fallacy of expecting a light at the end of the tunnel, well, that's what the preacher sells, same as a shrink. See, the preacher, he encourages your capacity for illusion. Then he tells you it's a fucking virtue.¹⁸

Still, the two quotes do not contradict one another. The Cohle who had just experienced the love of his deceased daughter would still be very skeptical about expecting the light at the end of the tunnel. Furthermore, the latter quote does not necessarily make Cohle a pessimist (or un-spiritual). After all, he is debating whether a priori knowledge exists as a possibility, or whether it remains an unknown potential until actualized. He is more an empiricist, if anything.

Cohle addresses paradoxes in the religious system (including Buddhism) when, e.g., a Dzogchen teacher claims that a higher consciousness “is not a matter of faith ... It is reality.”¹⁹ Yet, it is a divine reality towards which one *must* pray and meditate due to one's faith in its a priori real existence. It is normative. The practice of Buddhism becomes referential. And this is exactly what Cohle is skeptical about from episodes 1–8.

An immanent philosophy is self-referential in the sense that, e.g., praying is only possible at the same time as it is created, which is when it encounters something extraordinary, something yet unknown. Such an approach is more in alignment with the detective's. There is, however, no reason to call such an encounter divine, since it only questions our previous ignorance. Instead, we may call it mysterious, because it does not refer to anything known. Or we may call it love.

What is love then? The way love is expressed in *True Detective* appears close to how Spinoza defines love as the increase of our joy. Cohle acknowledges the external cause, something outside his control, emphasizing that love is never self-love, but rather related to one's capacity to act, which again is related to one's capacity to be affected. “Love replaces obedience,” writes Deleuze, because obedience leads to sad passions that diminish one's power to act.²⁰

“We left something undone,” Cohle tells his former partner Hart in 2012, 17

¹⁸ *True Detective*, episode 3.

¹⁹ Bertelsen (2013), p. 62.

²⁰ Deleuze (1997), p. 291.

years after the original murder and ten years since the two partners have seen each other. At the very end of the serial, Cohle is a man more capable of acting; he appears more powerful than before. This is exactly why an immanent philosophy cares more about the interesting or remarkable, when it occurs, than about a predefined truth.²¹

In other words, Cohle may experience a higher consciousness, but if so, then he did so because he was open and vulnerable, not because he was seeking it. It happened. An immanent philosophy as presented here, therefore, is open to what – at the present moment – is outside our experience or system of knowledge. It questions its ignorance in order to know more, but it does not claim that another world exists before it encounters this world. “By and large, it is painful to think,” says Arne Næss, which is not the same as saying that life is painful *per se*.²² Rather, as Deleuze writes, “[E]very thought becomes an aggression.”²³ It is painful to be confronted with one’s ignorance. Similarly, it is also painful for Cohle to experience the love of his daughter, who had passed away 20 years earlier. It transforms him, perhaps in the sense that suffering in Buddhism can bring an end to suffering. Furthermore, Schopenhauer stressed that pain was the positive element in life. Here the pain is related to the fulfillment of a task: the simple task of living, i.e., surviving, perhaps, reproducing and then dying, as well as becoming aware thereof.

The approach, therefore, is the main way that a philosophy, as it is presented here, differs from pessimism and Buddhism. It may be illustrated by listening to the detectives:

Cohle: We’re gonna have to be looking at these records with fresh eyes,

Hart: All right?

Cohle: Like we’re totally green.

The difference between the detectives and Buddhism (i.e., Dzogchen) is that the latter operates with an ideal state of being, a state of “great perfection” when “looking directly into the nature of Mind.”²⁴ The detectives are more susceptible. For example, looking with fresh eyes makes Hart ask: “Why green ears?” –

²¹ Deleuze & Guattari (1994), pp. 20-22.

²² Næss (2002), p. 13.

²³ Deleuze (2004), p. xix. See also Deleuze (1997), p. 383, where what he calls “the capacity to be affected” is defined as “the aptness of a body both for suffering and acting.”

²⁴ Dechen & Chogyam (2002), p. 4.

referring to the description the detective had received about the killer 17 years earlier (“the green-eared spaghetti monster”).

It is, therefore, through questioning that the detectives move beyond pessimism and Buddhism and become philosophers.

The philosophical creation begins with inventing a problem, e.g., why green ears? This questioning is missing in pessimism and Buddhism, because both apparently know what is true and not true. The detectives do not exclude anything; they remain open to whatever, e.g., whether a human being has green ears. They question what they do not know. “A concept always has the truth that falls to it as a function of the conditions of its creation.”²⁵

Thus, the invention of a problem activates the creation of new solutions. The mystery is only a mystery due to one’s ignorance. The philosopher (or true detective) questions his or her ignorance. “No one has yet determined *what the body can do...*”²⁶

The detectives’ humility establishes a whole in the present, a form of silence where the unknown or un-nameable can take form. They try not to anticipate their desire to catch the killer, but follow the signs with patience.

Questioning one’s previous ignorance is one of the main themes for the true detective. This is basically what *True Detective* is all about. An encounter is always risky since no one knows the outcome beforehand. Thus, the detectives take risks. The detectives’ forms of life change drastically once they let go and follow the tracks.

4. True Compassion

True Detective begins in the middle with an event: the crime. However, what is questioned is the crime itself. In other words: What is the actual crime? Is it the murder of the young women? Is it the way everything is kept in the shadow by the authorities? Is it the forms of life expressed by the detectives, e.g., their moral hypocrisy or cynicism?²⁷ Is it being alive as such that is a crime (antinatalism)? Is it not caring?

I believe it is possible to argue that *True Detective* is discussing the last

²⁵ Deleuze & Guattari (1994), p. 27.

²⁶ Deleuze (1997), p. 383.

²⁷ Cohle’s partner, Detective Hart, appears to be a moralistic hypocrite; he believes in “family values” while he is having an affair, he seems to be a man of religion while he shows little forgiveness towards certain criminals, etc.

question: not whether being alive is worth caring about, but life. Just life. The mystery is how the human being qua being alive does not care about life. It is not a moralistic problem. Rather, it stems from an understanding of how everyone is interrelated – how the value of any life is connected with the life of nature, and vice versa. It is a matter of compassion for what is vulnerable.

I will illustrate this point by way of a detour. Cohle explains:

I think human consciousness is a tragic misstep in evolution. We became too self-aware. Nature created an aspect of nature separate from itself. We are creatures that should not exist by natural law. We are things that labor under the illusion of having a self; an accretion of sensory experience and feeling, programmed with total assurance that we are each somebody, when in fact everybody is nobody. Maybe the honorable thing for our species to do is deny our programming, stop reproducing, walk hand in hand into extinction, one last midnight – brothers and sisters opting out of a raw deal.²⁸

The human being has constructed an artificial gap between man and nature that hinders “the joy and wonder of immediate experience.”²⁹ It diminishes one’s compassion for life as such. Furthermore, this self-awareness neglects that there are forms of life that cannot exist without someone else taking care of them.

Personally, I concur with all that Cohle is saying except the last claim (and so would a Buddhist). I do not see any convincing argument for not reproducing. A priori, life is not only suffering. Still, I sympathize with Cohle’s skeptical statement; he emphasizes the “maybe,” because if there is no compassion or care in the world, then it *might* not be worth reproducing.

Once again, there is a likeness among pessimism, Buddhism and an immanent philosophy. All of them suggest viewing the human being not as an existence we can form as we wish, but as a life. That is a life that we do not own, but that we can care about, especially if we experience moments of joy and not only sadness. However, the difference is that an immanent philosophy does not claim that the basic element in life is either suffering or joy, but that both feelings exist. Therefore, should one feel inclined to reproduce or just affirm certain forces of life, it seems obvious to affirm the moments of joy, rather than

²⁸ *True Detective*, episode 1.

²⁹ Næss (1990), p. 1.

those of pain. One might say that “repetition is the thought of the future”; if one never experiences anything worth passing on, then perhaps it is better never to have been, as some claim. “There is no Good and Evil in Nature, there is no moral opposition, but there is an ethical difference. The difference lies in the immanent existing modes involved in what we feel, do and think.”³⁰

Yet, the antinatalist arguments that Benatar unfolds in *Better Never To Have Been* are based on moral abstractions. The problem is that he wishes to create a universal method of evaluating life, although it only functions to fulfill his claim that reproduction is never morally acceptable, because coming into existence is always harmful. Instead, one could claim that when Cohle experiences nothing but love at the end of the serial, then at that moment (not before) he knows what he has been doing all along. However, one can never know that from the beginning. Cohle’s experiences do not necessarily follow his claim; he remains open. This contrasts with Benatar’s conclusion that follows his claim: Coming into existence is always a harm; therefore, it is better never to have been.

Furthermore, the absence of pain may be good in some circumstances, e.g., serious illnesses, but not in others, e.g., being forced to think (i.e., change). Also, the absence of pain may be good, but never good in the sense that joy is good. For example, it is good that I did not fall off my bike this morning; however, this is an abstract experience that has nothing to do with the joy of experiencing overcoming an actual bike accident.

The antinatalist approach, although it raises relevant issues of whether reproducing is a human right or not, is a variation of former American president George W. Bush’s moral doctrine. Let me quote some of the former President’s ideas:

Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists ... We will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting preemptively against such terrorists; to prevent them from doing harm against our people and our country ... Nations need not suffer an attack before they can lawfully take action to defend themselves against forces that present an imminent danger of attack ... The greater the threat, the greater the risk of inaction – and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains

³⁰ Deleuze (1997), p. 269.

as to the time and place of the enemy's attack.³¹

For President Bush, it was morally right to attack a nation before it might strike you, because it presented a possible danger. Similar, Benatar claims that either one knows that coming into existence is a harm, or one is being naïve. This premise is apparently unquestionable, even though people who suffer from severe illnesses or impairment often believe that their life is still worth living. Benatar believes that the human being per se suffers from the “Pollyanna Principle” that says that people tend to assess the quality of their life as more positive than it really is.³² Furthermore, apparently it is our moral duty not to reproduce, because “815,000 people are thought to have committed suicide in 2000.”³³ And the rest of the human populations who refrain from committing suicide do so because they were self-seduced?

Still, claiming that coming into existence is always harmful seems impotent. It neglects the fact that life is dynamic. “Sometimes a man undergoes such changes that I should hardly have said he was the same man,” Spinoza writes.³⁴ Changes happen, especially if there is someone who actually cares. This is not to say that the world is not brutal. It is. Torture, rape, murder, severe illnesses, inequalities between gender, etc., exist. Still, Victor Frankl and Imre Kertesz, to mention two prominent writers, have mentioned that even in one of the worst places, a concentration camp during the Second World War, there were moments of happiness – small gestures where people took care of one another and showed levels of strength that some antinatalists cannot imagine.

The approach that I call philosophical is not a matter of being an optimist or pessimist, but of viewing the world as unchangeable or changeable. A philosopher asks the right questions, the kind of questions that are not part of a quiz show where we already know the right answer to begin with. Rather, the questions that invent new problems by acknowledging that our present is a potential constantly being actualized.

Many pessimists suggest that the human being refers to the existence of a higher and idealized being as a security blanket.³⁵ Such a blanket is problematic. A part of the suffering, though, is due to a too rigid belief in unchangeable

³¹ Bush (2002).

³² Benatar (2013), p. 64.

³³ Benatar (2013), p. 92.

³⁴ Quoted from Deleuze (1997), p. 383.

³⁵ Benatar (2013); Ligotti (2002).

certainties that decrease our sensitive and perceptive capacity for being aware, whether one claims that a God exists or that being alive is harmful. This basically goes for all kinds of normative ideals, related to spirituality, beauty, weight, job titles, opinions, etc. Today, we live in what Deleuze calls “control societies” where each one manages his or her life according to the norms and ideals that few are incapable of turning their backs to.

The problem of today’s control society is that too few dare to say “no” – to step out of the dominant ideals and norms related to the prestige of having a title, a career, and social identity, and ask “whose ends these serve.”³⁶ The control society is basically our own fault, because only a small number of people leave the scene of rigid performance evaluation. However, both detectives in *True Detective* get out. Cohle leaves his work as a detective in 2002, and Hart does so some years later. Afterwards, Cohle vanishes. A Buddhist may call it a retreat; a pessimist may call it just another delusion. Nevertheless, he is silent.

Cohle transforms during his absence. He becomes more compassionate. “We left something undone. We gotta fix it,” he tells Hart.³⁷ Thus, Cohle shows compassion, not for a God, but for life. He is concerned. Even after they have caught the killer, Cohle is suffering. “What’s your problem?” asks his partner Hart, whereupon Cohle answers, “Not a care in the world.”

The mystery, therefore, is why there is so little compassion. However, neither the kind of strategic compassion that is controlled by divine laws, nor the pseudo care that basically neglects how the human nature is inventive. It invests in the future by repeating what facilitate future innovations. Rather, the kind of compassion that cares about life and the life to come. It is an action-concept, a power to affirm what is coming into being.

5. True Time

Another way of framing the philosophical differences among Buddhism, pessimism and an immanent philosophy is through the concept of time.

Cohle says:

This is a world where nothing is solved. Someone once told me, “Time is a flat circle.” Everything we’ve ever done or will do, we’re gonna do over

³⁶ Deleuze (1995), p. 182.

³⁷ *True Detective*, episode 8.

and over and over again. And that little boy and that little girl, they're gonna be in that room again and again and again forever.³⁸

If time is a flat circle where the same events are repeated over and over, then life really can become a nightmare, especially if life is suffering to begin with. However, it might be possible to pass on more positive encounters with life that others may (or may not) find inspirational. "Emotions are not objects, things that we own. They emerge from an encounter between ourselves-and-the-world ... We *are* emotions and relationships," writes Næss.³⁹

What matters is how open and unarmed we encounter the world, i.e., without a transcendent guidebook in our hand. Næss continues by saying, "Reason loses its function where there is no motivation, and motivation is absent where there are no feelings either for or against."⁴⁰

To live, therefore, is something else than to function, e.g., by fulfilling a role or identity, or to live one's life according to an already decided-upon ideal. Instead, a life is changing, because life *is* changing – i.e., time changes. Time is change. The human being is intrinsically motivated to do certain things; therefore, they must be good due to the feelings that they awaken. And here, of course, one must be aware that some people might be intrinsically motivated not to procreate, just as some might be intrinsically motivated to think about thinking. However, the debatable question is whether one can be intrinsically motivated to do so, since both refer to ideals that the person needs to believe in; they are not based on an immediate awareness.

Thus, what I suggest is that our actions are not guided by something that is already given, but by how various encounters with life affect us. For example, it is not given at the beginning of *True Detective* that the killer is a painter. The detective gets there through questioning and compassion, both of which are related to the fact that we do not know what the human being is capable of; different connections may emerge whereby new forms of being come to life.

This challenge can be illustrated through differences: the possible versus the real, and the potential versus the actual. Both Buddhism and pessimism operate within the distinction of the possible and the real. The problem with this distinction is that the possible can too easily seem more realistic than what is

³⁸ *True Detective*, episode 5.

³⁹ Næss (2002), p. 15.

⁴⁰ Næss (2002), p. 4.

real. It tends to become a delusion, at least until it can be tested. The difference between the potential (or virtual) and the possible is that the former “is real without being actual, ideal without being abstract,” as Deleuze and Guattari famously repeat Proust.⁴¹ The potential, in other words, is a force that consists of our lived life that is not yet actualized.

Our memory is dynamic. That is to say, various encounters with life may touch one in a way that activates certain memories in a new light. Encounters can affect the human being in a way that may actualize unknown forces in that person. “Sometimes a man undergoes such changes ...” as Spinoza said.

A joyous life is an active and creative life that relives life. I do not mean an identical recurrence of the same things over and over. Ligotti mentions how Jorge Luis Borges claimed that “the eternal return of the same” is “the most horrible idea in the universe.”⁴² I agree. However, for Nietzsche at least, the “eternal return” was not a repetition of the same, but of the difference. Nietzsche wanted to affirm the difference that brings things into life. This is done through being aware and attentive towards what happens and how it happens.

To live a life worth repeating is to acknowledge what is in the midst of becoming. The challenge is to step aside, i.e., put down one’s self-awareness or one’s armor of identity. This is done in order to invent or create a room where that which is in the midst of becoming can become. It is to accept that there is no authentic self inside each of us, just flesh and bones. Each one of us is an empty form that is being formed by life itself. It marks us. Impregnates us. This process is philosophical, not spiritual. The spiritual might agree that there is no end-goal for our existence; it might believe that there is no self; it might even believe that consciousness is problematic. Still, it aims at a divine or transcendent enlightenment. Philosophy does not aim at anything. Just life.

Philosophy as presented, like a true detective, rereads the signs; he or she unfolds the material to see whether there is something yet to be actualized. The past is brought to life, but differently.

In the first episode, Cohle says: “I get a bad taste in my mouth out here ... aluminum ... ash ... like you can smell a psychosphere.” The “psychosphere” is a strange concept that, I believe, should not be related to a higher consciousness nor to a collective one. Rather, I see it as pure becoming, i.e. the unconscious per se. Deleuze and Guattari describe the “unconscious as an acentered

⁴¹ Deleuze & Guattari (1994), p. 22.

⁴² Borges quoted from Ligotti (2002), p. 235.

system.”⁴³ It connects with other forms of life that result in new states of unconsciousness. Life is a rhizomatic production of the unconscious. It is without beginning or end; it grows between, from the middle.

Later, Cohle experience something similar:

Cohle: That taste.

Hart: What?

Cohle: Aluminum, ash. I’ve tasted it before.⁴⁴

This time he is capable of connecting this experience with the past. He recalls, silently, that the last time he experienced this taste, it was bad. By mentioning the smell 17 years earlier, he is repeating the future. His own awareness is not just an awareness of the present, but also the present reactivating the past. Time changes.

Thus, what makes pessimism and Buddhism problematic is that they do not solve many crimes. They question too little. Or, if they question, then the questioning is formed by the ideals they already believe to be true. They hinder their own awareness when they operate with an already given setup for how the world is, and how it will be for all eternity.

This brings us to the question of metaphysics.

6. Discussion

Deleuze’s philosophy is not spiritual, nor is it pessimistic. He does share some of the thoughts from the Dzogchen teaching of Buddhism when he stresses that philosophy deals with “pure lived experience.”⁴⁵ Yet, he refers to the pure experience of what happens here and now.

Several things become important.

First of all, Deleuze does not operate with a meta-language. In other words, his philosophizing does not seek the divine (or any other thing, for that matter). Therefore, he does not judge, because judgment misses the creation of a mode of existence – the being of becoming. “Judgment prevents the emergence of any

⁴³ Deleuze & Guattari (2000), p. 18.

⁴⁴ *True Detective*, episode 8.

⁴⁵ Deleuze (2004), p. 238.

new mode of existence.”⁴⁶

Detective Cohle, however, makes judgments. An example might illustrate this:

Hart: It’s hard to find something in a man who rejects people as much as you do, you know that?

Cohle: I never told you how to live your life, Marty.

Hart: No, no, no, you just sat in judgment.

Cohle: Look, as sentient meat, however illusory our identities are, we craft those identities by making value judgments. Everybody judges, all the time. Now, you got a problem with that, you’re living wrong.⁴⁷

The human being is a piece of meat with the capacity to feel. Some feelings are more positive than others, depending on what we encounter. Thereby, we gradually become. What is important is whether this value judgment is based on natural impulses, here and now, or based on norms and ideals that we strive to live up to, e.g., in order to belong to a society or a religious community. Values are produced through natural impulses – for example, the value of recalling a certain taste in one’s mouth – unlike values that control our behavior in accordance with a transcendent moral system. When values serve as a tool of evaluating or judging, they prevent new modes of existence from emerging. The problem with Buddhism is that on the one hand, it claims to leave judgment aside, while on the other hand, it introduces a higher set of meaningful purposes that serve as a judge. The whole process of “wordless prayer” / “meditation” therefore serves a specific purpose to bring one closer to experiencing small moments of higher consciousness, because a “higher consciousness” is defined as being good.

The problem is metaphysical.

Metaphysics can be translated as what is “beyond” or “besides” (*Gr.* “meta”) physics. Heidegger made it obvious that the question of metaphysics was related to both ontology (what is) and theology (God’s relation to the world). In other words, “what is” has traditionally been understood in reference to theology, i.e., various religious systems having the master plan. This, of course, reduces the

⁴⁶ Deleuze (1998), p. 135.

⁴⁷ *True Detective*, episode 8.

practice of ontology to an ongoing posterity test of the validity of an already a priori divine order. Trial and error becomes less experimental; it does not question our ignorance, only our capacity to do what is already right. And it is exactly here that I think Deleuze overcomes the problems of suffering: that life is suffering per se, just as it is painful, perhaps delusional, to overcome this suffering.

Deleuze operates with a metaphysic of becoming rather than one of being. He does not operate with an a priori existence of transcendent values such as a God or the divine. There is only change, becoming. The difference, however, is very delicate, even fragile, since the bidirectional openness in Buddhism is described as keeping “the mind colourless, formless, and imageless.”⁴⁸

Some may object that all the above-mentioned confusion is a matter of words. After all, what interests Dzogchen teaching of Buddhism is when consciousness turns its awareness towards itself, i.e., apperception. And here we take a step into the unknown in the sense that we cross the borders of what can be described in known language; we step outside any figure of representation. The challenge now is whether I thereby operate with a language of science where one term can be replaced with another – God with mystery, the divine with interesting, etc. If so, then I make the same mistake for which I so far have blamed Buddhism and pessimism. To overcome this, I place philosophy outside classical science. The philosophical language is far more poetic since “every term is irreplaceable and can only be repeated.”⁴⁹ So, to emphasize, I do not think it is a matter of swapping one word for another. However, once again our answer is integrated into the crime drama. Deleuze suggests the following relationship between philosophy and the detective genre:

A book of philosophy should be in part a very particular species of detective novel, in part a kind of science fiction. By detective novel we mean that concepts, with their zones of presence, should intervene to resolve local situations. They themselves change along with the problems. They have spheres of influence where, as we shall see, they operate in relation to ‘dramas’ and by means of a certain ‘cruelty.’ They must have a coherence among themselves, but that coherence must not come from

⁴⁸ Bertelsen (2013), p. 86.

⁴⁹ Deleuze (1994), p. 2.

themselves. They receive their coherence from elsewhere.⁵⁰

The true detectives draw a map of relations, all with zones of presence. At times, certain “zones of neighborhood” intersect, whereby something new emerges. A new concept then opens for new relations, new intersections and so forth. There is no real reality that the detective is referring back to (or towards). The present activates the past, not just as a taste of aluminum, but also as something significant.

The investigation is a gradual actualization that increases our reality. Yet, the logic is never given. The detective’s approach is poetic when it tries to grasp what the detective encounters, i.e., navigating at the same time as one produces the map that helps one to navigate. The detectives receive their coherence from elsewhere – not from their own personal agenda, not from a higher ideal, but from paying attention to everything.

A Cohle and Hart dialogue may exemplify that:

Cohle: If the only thing keeping a person decent is the expectation of divine reward, then brother that person is a piece of shit; and I’d like to get as many of them out in the open as possible.

Hart: Well, I guess your judgment is infallible, piece-of-shit-wise. You think that notebook is a stone tablet?

Cohle: What’s it say about life, hmm? You gotta get together, tell yourself stories that violate every law of the universe just to get through the goddamn day? Nah. What’s that say about your reality, Marty?⁵¹

Cohle, therefore, is neither a pessimist nor a Buddhist. What matters is not whether an experience represents a set of moral or epistemological categories, i.e., a higher purpose. On the contrary, when it is impossible to judge the purposefulness of the activity, we are on a philosophical track. Here, Cohle is a good example, because he follows the direction of what affects him. He follows the wind of each encounter. Buddhism and pessimism tell us what purpose is worth pursuing (e.g., higher consciousness vs. termination of human life). Each pursuit or practice, e.g., praying towards God is judged to be true in the light of this purpose. It resembles the snake eating its own tail.

⁵⁰ Deleuze (1994), p. xix.

⁵¹ *True Detective*, episode 3.

What makes elements of pessimism and Dzogchen similar is that they both stop the process of becoming. It happens when they evaluate the usefulness or uselessness of each moment: e.g., procreation is questionable since the world is suffering (the pessimist), whereas spiritual training is useful, because there is light somewhere (the Buddhist). They share the idea of meaning as something given: either life is suffering per se or love is possible. Neither approach seems to question the possibility that meaning is not something in itself, that meaning is not given. For example, suffering is not something that one can own or possess. Rather, one can only experience either suffering or love. In other words, it – everything – only exists as a happening, an event.

A mystery is an event. “Puppet strings, as a rhizome or multiplicity, are tied not to the supposed will of an artist or puppeteer but to a multiplicity of nerve fibers, which form another puppet in another dimension connected to the first ... There are only lines.”⁵² It is through raising the right questions that the detective becomes compassionate about things that had been hidden; the signs propagate, new maps are drawn, lines are extended until they intersect with a blockage. The one, who is not caring about life, is the murder. It emphasizes that the actual killer, the green-ear monster, did not operate alone. He was, after all, not the only one who did not care. Unfortunately. However, more positively, *True Detective* stresses that the future does not depend on the survival of the fittest, but on the survival of compassion.

7. Conclusion

Detective Cohle experiences pure love when he slips away and experiences death; he is capable of letting go of all his definitions. Yet, modern medicine and technology keep him hanging. The reason he experiences this is that for more than 17 years, he has tried to become worthy of what happened back in 1995. He has been doing what he does best: investigating and analyzing the case material, pushing his investigations to the limit, even looking where he was not supposed to look. He looked with the eyes of a bad man. As he tells Hart, “The world needs bad men. We keep the other bad men from the door.”⁵³

For more than ten years, after leaving the police department, he has been meditating about the crime in a room behind a bar. And what happens after all

⁵² Deleuze & Guattari (2000), p. 8.

⁵³ *True Detective*, episode 3.

these years? He feels motivated, even responsible, to do what he feels an urge to do: solve the mystery. Cohle is not ordered to do anything; he just feels like it. He is no longer a detective, but a bartender. It is a natural impulse that guides him. Thus, the moral of *True Detective* is that when one matures emotionally, one also feels interrelated with other human beings, and in doing that, one becomes free.

At the end, Cohle takes off into the unknown, stripped of all his personal belongings. Finally, he feels at home in life, because he feels at peace or serene. He is in the exact position where he can become with nature. He is beyond being. He is just a life passed by life.

He has solved the mystery. The question is not “Why is there so little compassion in this world?” Rather, it is “Why is so little compassion actualized, when our survival depends on it?” A dialogue may illuminate this:

Cohle: It’s just one story. The oldest.

Hart: What’s that?

Cohle: Light versus dark.

Hart: Well, I know we aren’t in Alaska, but ... appears to me that the dark has a lot more territory.

Cohle: Yeah. You're right about that.

(...)

Cohle: You know, you’re looking at it wrong, the ... sky thing.

Hart: How is that?

Cohle: Well, once, there was only dark. If you ask me, the light’s winning.⁵⁴

Life is suffering, yes. After all, it is full of awful things such as trafficking, mental illnesses, war, corruption, poverty, etc. Yet, life is also alive and joyous. The joy of being alive that, in spite of all the harm, still – for the majority of people – keeps the belt around the waist, not the neck. How come?

Small gestures happen where life is passed on, not as hope or faith, but as a possible future existence. Survival and compassion go hand in hand. A deep understanding of how everything is connected.

A *True Detective* is compassionate. Cohle survives because he keeps on

⁵⁴ *True Detective*, episode 8.

questioning what he does not know.

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