

The Stuff We're Made of: Subjectivity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

By Jacob M. Held

The soul occupies a privileged place in the ontology of the Buffyverse. As a plot device it accounts for the most interesting story arcs of Angel and Spike. But more importantly it is the specific difference between the human and the vampire, or the non-human in general. Simply put, the soul is what makes humans human, and specifically it is what makes a particular human that particular human. One is identified with one's soul. To lose one's soul is to lose one's self. This being the case, an interesting question can be raised: what is the soul?

Clearly the "soul" in the Buffyverse is a symbol of the concept of subjectivity. When somebody possesses their soul they are authentic, and when they lose their soul they fail to be the same person, in fact they fail to be a person at all. The soul is an allegory for selfhood, and as such can be informative regarding differing conceptions of the self and fundamental commitments regarding the same.

I maintain that there are two contradictory notions of the soul at work within BtVS and Angel: a deconstructivist (for lack of a better term) and a revisionist modernist or post-deconstructivist (for lack of a better term) conception. Each conception represents a particular school of thought on subjectivity. Weighing these conceptions against each other, thus, provides a window onto contemporary debate over the nature of subjectivity. The purpose of this paper is not to answer the question: what is subjectivity or who is the

individual? Rather my goal is more modest. I wish to elucidate two views of subjectivity: a deconstructivist conception and a post-deconstructivist conception. In presenting these two conceptions side by side I hope to demonstrate a fundamental commitment to a conception of the subject. I will propose that the postmodernist “death of the subject,” as represented by the deconstructivist notion of subjectivity, is premature, albeit without offering an exhaustive proof of such. Rather, I view the goal of this paper to be the motivation of a discussion beyond the “death of the subject.”

My procedure will be as follows: First, I will present the the deconstructivist conception of subjectivity operative in BtVS and represented here by the Lacanian conception of the barred subject. I will refer to this conception of subjectivity as the Vamp-Soul conception. The Vamp-Soul conception is articulated through examples of soulless vampires and their possession of traits commonly associated with selfhood, and ensouled vampires and there possession of qualities lacked by their soulless counterparts. Thus, we can define the soul by both what it is not and what it, ostensibly, is. Second, I will present an alternative conception of subjectivity as represented by Emmanuel Levinas’s notion of the post-deconstructivist subject. I will refer to this conception of subjectivity as the Buffy-Soul conception. The Buffy-Soul conception is articulated through one single, yet powerful scene. This conception remains vague enough to allow for a great variety of discussion yet specific enough to exclude the Vamp-Soul conception. Once both conceptions of the soul have been defined and their respective views on subjectivity elaborated I will articulate the merits of the Buffy-Soul conception over the Vamp-Soul

conception arguing that the Vamp-Soul conception is an anemic conceptualization of subjectivity.

Definition of the Soul

In BtVS the soul is synonymous with our concept of the subject. This concept itself has a rich tradition. In the Greek *hupokeimenon* is “that which lies under.” For Aristotle the subject is that of which things can be predicated, but which cannot be predicated of anything. In the Latin *subjectum* is “that which is thrown under,” and it connotes the foundation upon which all else is built. This original concept of the subject has since become equated with the subject as individual, or the subject of modern philosophy; consider the Cartesian Ego. This is the concept of the subject with which I wish to deal in this paper. In BtVS the soul is the subject in the literal sense, it is what lies beneath and upon which all else is built. The soul is the foundation of the human person. The question to be posed to each conception of the soul is therefore, of what is your foundation made?

The Vamp-Soul

Although there are two contradictory concepts of the soul at work in BtVS they share a common element: The soul is who we are. Thus, even though the Vampiric counterpart of a person may share some characteristics of the original person, they are not that person. In “Lie to Me” Buffy tells her friend Billy, with reference to what happens when one is turned: “You die and a demon sets up shop in your old house. And it walks and it talks and it remembers your life, but it’s not you.” Whatever characteristics the Vampiric

counterpart and the original version of a person share cannot, therefore, be constitutive of the individual, or the subject. The Vamp-Soul concept of subjectivity is thus explained in part by witnessing what Vampiric versions of people share with their original self and thus negatively defining the soul as not those characteristics. There are three useful examples for this task: Harmony, Vamp-Willow, and pre-soul Spike.

Harmony provides an interesting case. Consider the episode of Angel wherein everybody learns of Cordelia's supposed recovery from her coma. Harmony's reaction is baffling. Upon hearing the news Harmony is moved almost to tears and is ecstatic that her friend has recovered. But the Harmony reacting is Vamp-Harmony who should have no connection to Cordelia. Vamp-Harmony is a demon who has merely "set up shop" in Harmony's body. This demon did not go to school with Cordy and should have no connection to her what so ever. So why would Vamp-Harmony care about Cordelia? There are other examples of Harmony interacting with Cordy in similar ways, consider the Angel episode "Disharmony." In this episode Harmony, now a vampire, goes to L.A. to visit Cordy and they reminisce, paint each others toenails and so forth. Harmony appears to want to rekindle her friendship with Cordy. But why would the demon in Harmony care. Although she may share the memories of human Harmony, Vamp-Harmony is a demon. In fact, an even more interesting point is that in this same episode Vamp-Harmony seems to not even like being a vampire. How is this possible? Harmony is the demon in her body. She cannot have conflicting feelings about being a vampire since she is no longer present in the body, only the vampire is. And if this vampire hates being a vampire then there is something truly odd going on.

The problem is that the Vampire in Harmony is reacting to Cordelia in a way that we would expect human Harmony to. Clearly then, since Vamp-Harmony lacks the soul that human Harmony had, the soul cannot be surface self-attributions of the form “I am a friend to Cordelia, or I am the type of person who likes unicorns.” If all of these statements are true for Vamp-Harmony then they cannot be constitutive of Harmony’s soul, or the subject we refer to as Harmony.

On a similar note consider Spike. When in the seventh season of BtVS we flash back to when Spike is sired by Drusilla we are given a glimpse into his past relationship with his mother. After Spike is turned he turns his mother out of a desire to give her eternal life. He then wishes to have her travel with himself and Drusilla. When his mother rejects him he is distraught and upset. But why would Vamp-Spike care how human Spike’s mother reacts to him. Vamp-Spike should not care about human Spike’s mother at all. After all, once Spike is sired isn’t his soul, what makes him Spike, gone? The only answer is that Vamp-Spike is implicitly asserting statements of the sort: “I am the son of this woman, I am the type of person who loves his mother,” and so forth. Thus the possession of these attitudes cannot be constitutive of Spike’s soul or individuality. If the soul, or subject, is anything it must be something other than self-attribution of intentional, or conscious, states. It cannot be exhausted by our conscious beliefs about ourselves.

Finally, we get to the case of Vamp-Willow from “Doppelgangland.” In this episode Willow gets to experience a vampiric version of herself first hand, and her reaction is informative, and entertaining. Note the following dialogue from this episode:

Willow (in reference to her counterpart): I think I am kind of gay.

Buffy: Willow, just remember, a vampire’s personality has nothing to do
with the person it was.

Angel: Well, actually...

Our knowing that Willow is, or will become, in fact, a lesbian makes Angel’s remark all the more interesting. Clearly Buffy is wrong. A vampire’s personality does have something to do with the person it was. In fact, note the other striking similarity between Vamp-Willow and human Willow, namely the utterance: Bored Now. Clearly the soul or the subject cannot be defined by one’s conscious states. But the Vamp-Soul conception is not only defined negatively. Although we can look to what Vamp versions of characters share with their human counterparts and thus learn what the soul is not, we can also look to what ensouled versions of vampires possess that their soulless counterparts lack. As the cases of Spike and Angel will show, there is one specific difference between a vampire and its human counterpart, which shows what the soul must be, namely, conscience.

Both Spike and Angel are vampires with souls. Thus they can be used in order to compare what a vampire with a soul contains that a vampire without a soul does not. And this difference should be the content of the soul itself, it should be constitutive of the subject. So what do Angel and Spike contain that their soulless counterparts lack? The

answer is conscience. The only distinction between Angelus and Angel is that Angel feels remorse for his misdeeds, and thus avoids doing evil acts. The same goes for Spike. In fact, both Angel and Spike go through periods directly after they receive their respective souls where they are driven to the brink of madness by their consciences. Spike, however, is most illuminating given his experience with the Initiative's brain-chip. This chip is strikingly similar to one's conscience and hence one's soul.

When Spike is implanted with the chip he is incapable of doing evil because such acts cause him great physical pain. He does not have a soul but he is forced to do good, since the alternative is not a viable option. In this way the chip functions like a parent disciplining a young child. The child avoids bad behavior for fear of punishment, but should the child see an opportunity she will pursue her devious behaviors once again. With Spike we see this same situation. Once Spike's chip is no longer in play he does not know how to comport himself around others. There is no longer the parent's commands and discipline to keep him in check. In fact, one could argue his attempted rape of Buffy is a direct effect of the fact that punishment alone cannot create a motive for proper behavior. Without the threat of punishment Spike can behave as he wishes and he has no guide to instruct him of what to do or when, there is no moral compass.

So why do I bring this up? Consider the similarities and differences between the chip and the soul. Both prevent evil behavior through a system of punishments. The chip punishes through physical pain, the soul through mental pain, or guilt: the chip functions as a parent instructing a child, or external authority imposing a system of normative ethical

constraints on the child, and the soul functions as an internal authority imposing the same constraints. The soul, as conscience, can thus be equated to the psychoanalytic notion of the super-ego, or an internalized authority. Conscience is the internalized ego ideal of the parents, or any other cultural influence on the individual. It is internalized control.

Defined in this way the chip and the soul perform identical functions through different means. Spike's movement from the chip as control to the soul is simply an allegory for a child's development of a super-ego or conscience. In addition, the internalized norms need not be simply those of the parents, but rather those of the culture in which the child is raised, norms specific to her nationality, race or myriad other influences. Thus, the interpretation of the Vamp-Soul conception also accounts for the odd fact that the morality that both Spike and Angel possess is a 21st century liberal, pluralistic morality.

If the Vamp-Soul is conscience as defined as super-ego there is an interesting result. The subject, here depicted by the soul, is exhausted by one's system of internalized authority. What makes a person the person they are is not their sexuality (Vamp-Willow), their friends (Harmony), their family (Spike) or any other aspect we normally associate with individuality. Rather the individual is simply a construct of societal norms imposed on a psychological structure. One's place within such a symbolic order is exhaustive of the individual. In this sense Lacan's notion of the barred subject is a perfect example of the Vamp-Soul conception.

Lacan maintains that the subject is not the subject of self-attribution, or the subject that states "I am the type of person who likes x, y or z." Rather all of the utterances and

accounts presented by the ego are simply rationalizations of unconscious desires, actions and so forth. This conscious sense of self is simply a reification of the images given to one during, what he terms, the mirror stage. Our sense of self is derived from how we are represented to ourselves by others, when we are referred to as “the good son” or “the model daughter” This “I think” or “I am the type of person who...”, associated with the Cartesian notion of subjectivity is, for Lacan, a false being. It believes itself to be master of its own thoughts and in so doing it rejects the unconscious. The Vamp-Soul conception presents the same idea in a clearer fashion. The surface self exhibited by one’s relations to others or one’s memories is merely a veil over the self, the self of the unconscious as constituted by the discourse of the other, here represented by the Freudian conception of the super-ego, or the conscience.

This idea of the soul, although interesting, has certain serious ramifications. Our common sense notion of subjectivity and individuality is rendered untenable. We cannot identify ourselves with our conscious states and attitudes, rather these are simply manifestations of a socially constructed subjectivity. This is the idea behind the death of the subject. If the subject is simply a construct of an external structure, then there is no subject beneath, above or behind this structure. There is no subject left. However, The Buffy-Soul conception is a direct response to this notion.

The Buffy-Soul

The idea of the Buffy-Soul conception rests on one quote from “Becoming Pt. 2” In this episode Buffy has been expelled from school, she is wanted by the police, her mother has effectively kicked her out of the house, Willow is in the hospital and Angel is evil and hell bent on ending the world. Near the end of the episode Buffy faces Angel and they fight. During the fight Angel disarms Buffy and is poised to kill her. The following dialogue follows:

Angel: “That’s everything. No weapons, no friends, no hope. Take all that away and what is left?”

Buffy: “Me”

Buffy’s simple response signifies a direct response to the Vamp-Soul conception of subjectivity. The Vamp-Soul conception would maintain that if you take everything away, there is nothing left that would even mildly resemble the original person. But Buffy responds, and she does so in a way that is very moving. You can take her friends, her family, her school, and basically her life. You can take it all and something does remain: the slayer in front of your face.

This response is strikingly similar to Levinas’s response to the deconstructivist assault on classical concepts of subjectivity. In this way the distinction between the Vamp-Soul and the Buffy-Soul can be recast as the distinction between the deconstructionist death of the subject and Levinasian “post-deconstructive” subjectivity. (Although Levinas’s attempt at a response is not unique, his conception fits perfectly the example of subjectivity represented by the above scenario. That is primarily why it was chosen.)

A full accounting of Levinas's post-deconstructive subjectivity is not possible here, but the main point is important. Levinas wants to return to the subject its position as the essence of the person, or its nature as subject in the proper sense of the term. One might even say Levinas wants to restore the subject as haecceity. He thus wants to re-ground the subject after its dissolution by the psychoanalytic, post-structuralist, linguistic tradition.¹ Levinas responds, acknowledging the work of Lacan (as well as others), that one cannot ignore the conditioning of the subject through language and narrative, through discourse and society. However, when you get to the root of it, no matter what to take away from the subject or how much you deconstruct it there is something that remains, the "Me". He is very persistent, this is not a universal I or Ego, rather this particular individual, this person, "Me". "As Levinas puts it, 'Subjectivity is not THE me, but me.'"² The status of "me," Levinas states, is derived from my relations to the other and the obligations imposed on me given my unique relationship to the other. Thus, Levinas states that one is a hostage to the other. The full ramifications of this theory are irrelevant for the current project. What is important is that recognizing the limit of deconstructive subjectivity, or the subject as viewed from the Vamp-Soul perspective, one looks for an alternative. An alternative that comports with the nature of subjectivity as experienced, as the experience of "me." Buffy presents this alternative when she states she is left beyond all of the surface characteristics associated with her personality. He states, very simply, when all is gone, the "me" remains, and nothing can dissolve this unique space. One's relation to the other solidifies one's place in the ontology of the universe. Whether or not one would want to grant that the nature of the subject, what grounds it, simply is its obligations to

¹ Cf. Deconstructive Subjectivities, Simon Critchley, "Prolegomena to Any Post-Deconstructive Subjectivity"

² Ibid., 32, my emphasis

the other one must acknowledge that there is a response to the premature signaling of the death of the subject. And Buffy has said it loud and clear. What is left? Me.