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**“Normal Again” and “The Harvest”:
The Subversion and Triumph of Realism in
*Buffy***

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“What’s more real? A sick girl in an institution or some kind of super girl chosen to fight demons and save the world? That’s ridiculous. A girl who sleeps with a vampire she hates? Yeah, that makes sense.”

Buffy to Dawn in “Normal Again” (6.17)

[1] One of the key features that makes *Buffy* a postmodern text is the sudden and inexplicable introduction of alternate realities that subverts viewer expectations and creates, as Matthew Pateman points out, a strong sense of defamiliarization or strangeness and, I would add, an equally strong feeling of unease and disquiet (Pateman 27-28). The surprising appearance of Dawn as Buffy’s younger sister in the first episode of season five has precisely this effect because it explicitly contradicts what we know about Buffy during the first four seasons, namely that she is an only child. Not only is Dawn’s appearance a mystery, but her unquestioned acceptance by Buffy, Joyce, and the rest of the Scoobies including Tara and Anya is equally disturbing and unnerving. A comparable subversion occurs in “Superstar” (4.17) when former high school nerd and doormat Jonathan Levinson, who Buffy had persuaded not to commit suicide in the bell tower in “Earshot” (3.18), appears not only as the unquestioned leader of the Scoobies to whom Buffy plays second fiddle and whom Xander, Willow, and Tara idolize, but as a world famous celebrity who excels at everything, from playing chess and authoring books to inventing the internet and being a jazz musician. If Dawn’s appearance doesn’t make you feel that you’re watching a different show, then Jonathan’s stardom certainly does. In each of these narrative threads the strangeness and disquiet disappear when we eventually learn that the alternate reality is a product of magic and therefore unstable and reversible.[\[1\]](#) A similar structure occurs in many of the other alternate reality episodes where viewer expectations are originally subverted due to a lack of knowledge and subsequently confirmed when the nature and cause of the alternate reality is revealed.[\[2\]](#)

[2] As subversive and disquieting as these threads and episodes are, they pale in comparison to what is presented in the deeply disturbing but brilliantly executed “Normal Again” (6.17) in which Buffy is apparently stabbed by a demon, throwing her periodically into an alternate reality where she has been an inmate in a mental institution for six years suffering from schizophrenia. As Buffy alternates between the two realities, one in which she is the slayer and that we have come to expect through six seasons of the show, and one in which she is a mental patient, she loses her footing, so to speak, her connection with reality. She no longer knows which reality is real and which is delusional, nor do we. But unlike the narrative threads involving Dawn and Jonathan, the one in “Normal Again” has no epistemological resolution. While Buffy eventually opts for one reality over another, a choice that will be discussed in depth later, it is not based on epistemic grounds. Buffy never does discover which reality is the real one, nor do we, and this places “Normal Again” in a unique position among all 144 *Buffy* episodes. It raises the real possibility of a permanent subversion of the text not just a temporary one. It calls into question not just portions of the text but the entire text. The postmodern resonance of the episode is not confined to this destabilizing effect; it also implies an antirealist epistemology that runs counter to the dominant realist assumptions of the show. In part one of what follows, I argue for an antirealist interpretation of “Normal Again,” an argument that requires a careful examination of Buffy’s choice-situation, a full understanding of which comes from an unlikely source. In part two I examine and respond to a recent argument by Wendy Olson against an antirealist reading of *Buffy* and explain how a

particular form of antirealism, namely neo-pragmatism, offers a better framework for understanding and explaining the slayer's actions than that proposed by Olson. Part three lays bare the dominant realist framework of the show by using a paradigmatic scene from "The Harvest" (1.2) and defends an epistemological interpretation that runs counter to those offered by a number of commentators. It then takes up the central conflict between the realist and antirealist (neo-pragmatic) approaches to knowledge as it plays out in Buffy's controversial relationship with Spike in seasons five and six.

"Normal Again" and Antirealism

[3] Having discovered that Warren, Andrew, and Jonathan (who call themselves "the trio") are not only behind the annoying pranks which have plagued her since she was resurrected by Willow but are also deeply involved in the murder of Warren's ex-girlfriend which they tried to trick her into believing she committed ("Dead Things," 6.13), Buffy decides to track them down with the help of a list of recent house rentals. In the opening scene of "Normal Again" (6.17) she is closing in on their hideout when they spot her with surveillance equipment, and Andrew summons a demon that attacks and stabs her with a long, razor-sharp stinger protruding from between two of its fingers. At that moment, in a startling cut, the stinger is transformed into a long needle that an orderly is injecting into Buffy's arm to calm her down. The scene is no longer the streets of Sunnydale but the ward of a mental institution where Buffy has been a patient for the last six years. Thus begins a grueling and harrowing ordeal in which Buffy, through no intention of her own, is thrown back and forth between the two worlds, becoming increasingly lost and confused and unable to tell which is real and which is delusory, and as she descends into confusion, so do we.

[4] As the narrative unfolds, it gradually becomes clear that neither Buffy nor we as viewers have any reliable way of knowing which reality is veridical and which is not. There are several reasons for this. First, each world seems equally rational, coherent, and real to Buffy when she is inside each one. Even though her commitment to which one is real will change twice during the episode, these changes are not based on any knowledge or evidence but on something else altogether. In neither world is there anything anomalous or out of place to tip her off and decide the issue. Moreover, the reality of each world and the delusory quality of the other world is strongly reinforced by its respective inhabitants, making it difficult for Buffy to question its reality while inside it. Just as Willow, Dawn, and Xander continually reinforce the view that the other world is a hallucination, so Buffy's doctor, her parents, and the orderlies constantly support the view that the Sunnydale reality is delusional. Second, as viewers we're in the same boat as Buffy; our vantage point outside the narrative affords us no privileged insight. This is true not only for the reason above but also because the alternate reality of the mental institution is not presented as gothic, strange, or out of the ordinary. Nor is Buffy's doctor portrayed as sinister or menacing but rather as deeply caring and compassionate. He has an intimate knowledge of her delusional world and tries desperately to help her break it down. This strategy has the effect of normalizing this reality and making it seem just as real and plausible as the slayer reality. Third, each world provides a rational and convincing explanation of the other putative delusional world and offers Buffy a way out, a method to become whole again. In the Sunnydale world, Willow explains Buffy's delusional world as the result of being injected with a psychoactive agent that causes hallucinations, the solution to which is first to identify the demon and then discover how to create an antidote, both of which Willow will eventually do. In the other world, her doctor explains her delusions as a product of her mental illness or schizophrenia. Surprisingly, he goes beyond just providing an explanation to Buffy's parents; he also describes and analyzes her delusional world in uncanny detail, explaining, among other things, the appearance of Dawn:

Buffy's delusion is multi-layered. She believes she's some type of hero...the Slayer... But that's only one level. She has also created an intricate latticework to support her primary delusion. In her mind she's the central figure in a fantastic world beyond imagination. She has surrounded herself with friends, most with their own superpowers, who are as real to her as you and me, more so unfortunately. Together they face grand overblown conflicts against an assortment of monsters, both imaginary and rooted in actual myth...Dawn, the magical key. Buffy inserted Dawn into her delusion, actually rewriting the entire history of it to accommodate a need for a familial bond. ("Normal Again," 6.17)

If that weren't enough to establish his credibility, he then shows Buffy how her delusion is crumbling,

and in the process explains much of the sixth season:

Buffy, [creating Dawn] created inconsistencies, didn't it? Your sister, your friends, all those people you created in Sunnydale, they're not as comforting as they once were, are they? They're coming apart...You used to create these grand villains to battle against, and now what is it? Just ordinary students you went to high school with. No gods or monsters, just three pathetic little men who like playing with toys. ("Normal Again," 6.17)

When she asks her doctor what she has to do to get well again, he tells her: "You have to start ridding your mind of those things that support your hallucinations. There are things in that world you cling to. For your delusion, they're safe holes, but for your mind, they're traps. You have to break those down ... I'm talking about those things you want there, what keeps you going back." To which Buffy replies "my friends." To get well, Buffy has to dismantle the latticework that supports her delusion, which means destroying the major characters in her delusion: Willow, Xander, and Dawn (Giles is in England, Anya has left town, and Tara is not around when Buffy decides to act).

[5] A final reason for Buffy's confusion and our uncertainty is the strong antirealist undercurrent of "Normal Again" (6.17). By antirealism, I mean the view that denies the truth or plausibility of each of the following realist theses: (1) that there is an objective reality or world which exists independent of human concepts, language, and culture; (2) that this objective reality or world is knowable only through representations of thought (ideas, concepts) or language (sentences) which mirror or correspond to this reality; and (3) that this correspondence can be established with a high degree of certainty through a special faculty of reason or some other touchstone or authority. Knowledge, in other words, has a foundation which defeats skepticism. For the realist, the fundamental epistemic relationship between the mind and reality or subject and object is one of representation and correspondence. To know the real is to have a true or accurate representation of it and be able to confirm this accuracy by appealing to some epistemic authority. The problems with this view are well known but bear repeating. To begin with, this "objective reality" is so penetrated and mediated by elements of human thought and language that the project of mirroring or representing it in an accurate way is fatally compromised from the beginning. Moreover, even if, contrary to fact, this mediation could be transcended, there is no way in principle to know whether our ideas or sentences correspond to a reality which by definition is radically other. Epistemological realism is an impossible attempt to view reality from a non-contextual point of view, to see the world from nowhere. For Buffy, as for the antirealist, there is no touchstone or benchmark to which she can appeal, no "God's-eye view" from which she can look upon both worlds and determine which is real. In the *Meditations*, Descartes has "the light of reason" and "clear and distinct ideas" to prove God's existence and eliminate the possibility of an hallucinatory world created by an evil genius, and in Plato's *Republic* the philosopher ruler has a special faculty of recollection to escape the shadows and objects of the cave (the world of appearance) and gain knowledge of true reality, but Buffy has no such recourse. Each world seems equally real and inescapable, and there is no special faculty or epistemic authority to light the way.

[6] On an antirealist interpretation, Buffy is trapped, as we all are, in the social and cultural web of her own beliefs, values, and interests from which escape is impossible. One way of understanding her conundrum is through the Wittgensteinian notion of language-games. As she alternates between the two worlds, she finds herself within two different language-games: the language-game of a mentally ill patient and the language-game of a slayer-hero. Each game has its own method and rules for success, and each is equally "real" or legitimate when she is playing it. Reflexivity occurs within each game, as Buffy questions each while playing it, but when she decides to leave the language-game she is playing, all she can do is replace it with another language-game. She cannot transcend the language-game matrix; she cannot escape the boundaries and limitations imposed by her language and her culture. Any attempt to transcend language-games altogether by trying to show that particular representations correspond to or mirror a reality outside the language-game matrix simply brings into play another language-game. It's not that such a trans-linguistic reality or objective world does not exist, but rather that it makes no sense to posit it or talk about it. As a theoretical construct, it does no work, serves no purpose, and leads to a philosophical dead end.[\[3\]](#)

[7] Why is an antirealist interpretation of "Normal Again" superior to a realist interpretation of the same events? According to the most common realist interpretation, what I call one world realism to distinguish it from multiple worlds realism, there is an objective reality or independent world, but Buffy

is unable to confirm or disconfirm the representations she has of each reality to determine which one has objective status. In other words, while the first two defining conditions of realism cited above obtain, the third does not, and skepticism is the result. There are several problems with this reading. First, this skepticism is inconsistent with the non-skeptical realism in the rest of the narrative in which Giles, Buffy, and the rest of the gang are seen to have true and certain (or at least unquestioned) knowledge of specific features of the Buffyverse. Moreover, the "skepticism" that Buffy experiences is preliminary not final, and her uncertainty and confusion are not theoretical but practical and existential. Unlike Rene Descartes and David Hume who can bracket their philosophical doubt and return to the real world at the end of the day, Buffy can do nothing of the sort. She literally does not know who she is. What's at stake, as we will see shortly, is nothing less than her identity as a person, who she really is and what she wants to be. We will also see that the resolution of this crisis is not epistemological, a matter of knowing which world is veridical and which is delusional, but volitional and affective, a matter of will, choice, and action. When she makes her final decision, she determines not which world is objectively real but which world is real for her, which world she wants to live in. In making this irreversible choice, she doesn't discover her identity; she reclaims it. The hypothesis of skeptical realism is beside the point and cannot explain Buffy's crisis.

[8] But there is a more startling and intriguing realist interpretation of Buffy's situation based on Hugh Everett's relative state formulation, later named the Many Worlds Interpretation (MWI) in quantum physics.^[4] Dissatisfied with the antirealist implications of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics, according to which quantum phenomena are observation-dependent, supporters of the MWI argue that all possible outcomes in an experiment, the sum of which is described by an equation known as the wave function, do not collapse or vanish when an observation and measurement are made, but rather continue to exist and evolve, each in its own separate reality or universe. In the Sunnydale world, Buffy tells a shocked Willow that her parents, believing her to be delusional, committed her to a mental institution after she saw her first vampire, and she was released only because she kept quiet about her slayer identity and what she had seen. As a possible application of the MWI to Buffy's situation in "Normal Again" (6.17), Jennifer Ouellette suggests that this moment in Buffy's life represents

a pivotal fork in the road where her chronological time line diverges along separate paths. Buffy's world literally splits into two distinct physical realities. Everything up to that point in the time line is identical, but on one path, Buffy is released and moves to Sunnydale where the "history" of the series unfolds. On the other, she never leaves the hospital, sinking so deeply into the fantasy world she has created that she is largely catatonic. (188)

According to the MWI, both worlds are equally real and each has an objective reality independent of any observer. It also follows that there is no longer just one Buffy but two Buffys, each residing in her own separate world. The problem with this interpretation is obvious. If there are two Buffys, then Buffy's crisis in "Normal Again" does not make sense, since it is clearly just one Buffy who is undergoing this crisis. On the MWI, each Buffy must inhabit her own separate world with no interaction between them. If, contrary to the MWI, there is interaction between the two real worlds, two separate Buffys would inhabit the same world. When Buffy moves from one world to the other, she does not encounter a doppelgänger, another Buffy, as Willow does in "Doppelgängland" (3.16), or as Olivia Dunham and Walter Bishop do in the second and third seasons of *Fringe*. Instead, she discovers a different version of herself. There aren't two Buffys with different histories and identities; there is only one Buffy experiencing two different identities. As we will see shortly, there is a common volitional core underlying both identities that will allow Buffy to "collapse the wave function" and end the crisis. In an attempt to meet this objection and save a realist interpretation, perhaps we can modify the MWI and regard Buffy as one person moving between two real worlds at different times. Leaving aside the vexing problem of how Buffy can move back and forth between these worlds (and magic is hardly an explanation), this interpretation cannot explain how Buffy the traveler can be the same person through time. In the Sunnydale world, Buffy is the slayer, her best friends are Willow and Xander, her parents are divorced, her mother is dead, and she is not mentally ill, but in the normal world, she is not the slayer, Willow and Xander are nonexistent, her parents are not divorced, her mother is alive, and she is mentally ill. Though she doesn't have these contradictory properties at the same time, she must have a continuity of identity through time in order to be the same person who is moving between worlds. On an antirealist view, Buffy is not experiencing two real worlds but two *apparently* real worlds, one of which is real (not

in a realist sense) and one of which is delusional. Since each world contains the mechanism for the destruction of the other--the antidote in the Sunnydale world and return to sanity in the normal world--choosing one world will collapse and destroy the other world. Since it is impossible to determine which world is real and which is delusional, once Buffy makes her choice, it makes no sense to ask whether from her point of view she has made the right one. At the macro level, Buffy's choice functions in the same way as observation and measurement do at the quantum level: her decision will determine what is real for her.

[9] If not for epistemic reasons, then why does Buffy change her belief in and commitment to the Sunnydale world and then back again? The reason for the first change is Spike, and Buffy's guilt and disgust over their sexual relationship. Just as she is about to take the antidote and destroy the alternate reality for good, Spike barges into her bedroom and issues an ultimatum that if she doesn't tell her friends about their sexual relationship, he will. For Buffy, this is the last straw in a joyless world from which she has been alienated since her resurrection. She pours the antidote in the trash, and in the next scene is back in the hospital telling her mother that "I don't want to go back there. I want to be healthy again. What do I have to do?" The reason for the second and final change is not as transparent. Acting on her commitment to get well by eliminating the "traps" which keep her returning to her delusional world, Buffy binds Willow, Xander and Dawn in the basement where earlier Spike and Xander had chained the demon in order to cut off its stinger and allow Willow to extract the antidote. Releasing the demon from its chains, Buffy retreats under the basement stairs to watch the demon destroy her "friends" and finally get free of this delusional world. Just then, Tara who has come to the house looking for Willow enters the basement, sees the predicament her friends are in, releases their bonds with a magical invocation, and is tripped by Buffy and falls down the stairs. With Tara out of the fight, Willow, Xander, and Dawn battle for their lives but are no match against the powerful demon, which soon will destroy them. Recoiling in fear against the basement wall under the stairs, Buffy is then thrown back and forth between the two realities, spending only a matter of seconds in each. As the scene alternates between the basement and her hospital room, Buffy sits on the floor in each world paralyzed in fear.

[10] Buffy now faces a critical choice situation which the entire episode has been leading up to. Perhaps, as in Pascal's Wager, she can still make a rational choice, but under conditions of uncertainty. There are only two choices with four possible outcomes, depending on which world is the real one. Either she can do nothing and choose the normal world, or she can slay the demon and opt for the Sunnydale world. If she chooses the normal world and the Sunnydale world is a delusion, then she will destroy the latticework that sustains her delusion and regain her sanity. If she chooses the normal world and the Sunnydale world is real, then she will be responsible for the deaths of her sister and best friends. On the other hand, if she chooses the Sunnydale world and it is a delusion, she will sabotage her chance to regain her sanity. If she chooses the Sunnydale world and it is real, she will avert the deaths of her sister and best friends. What makes this choice situation so difficult, apart from the obvious fact that there is no time for deliberation, is that under conditions of uncertainty, it cannot be resolved in any easy or straightforward way by reason. To see this, consider again each of the four likely outcomes described above:

- (a) If she chooses the normal world and the Sunnydale world is a delusion, she will regain her sanity, be reunited with her parents, and return to a much safer world free of vampires and demons.
- (b) If she chooses the normal world and the Sunnydale world is real, she will only think she has regained her sanity and will be responsible for the deaths of her sister and best friends.
- (c) If she chooses the Sunnydale world and it is a delusion, she will not regain her sanity or be reunited with her parents.
- (d) If she chooses the Sunnydale world and it is real, she will reclaim her identity as the slayer and avert the deaths of her sister and best friends.

There are only two rational choice strategies open to Buffy. Either she can follow a risk-averse strategy and choose the option that avoids the worst outcome, or she can follow a risk-taking strategy and choose the option that produces the best outcome. If she adopts the risk-averse strategy, she will have to choose (b) or (c), but it is not obvious which outcome is worse, the death of her sister and friends or

her permanent insanity. If, on the other hand, she adopts a risk-taking strategy, she will have to choose (a) or (d), but again it is not clear which outcome is best, the utility gained with her return to sanity, or the utility gained (and disutility avoided) in reclaiming her identity as the slayer and preventing the deaths of her sister and friends. Thus, even if she had the time, making a rational choice under conditions of uncertainty is out of the question.

[11] Seeing that her daughter is engaged in a powerful internal struggle to remove the “traps” preventing her recovery, Joyce intervenes and provides the stimulus for its ultimate resolution, although it’s not the one she expects:

Buffy, look at me. I believe in you. You’re a survivor. You can do this...you can beat this thing...I know you’re afraid. I know the world feels like a hard place sometimes. But you’ve got people who love you. Your Dad and I, we have all the faith in the world in you. We’ll always be with you. You’ve got a world of strength in your heart, I know you do. You just have to find it again. Believe in yourself! (“Normal Again,” 6.17)

Turning her head slightly and looking at her mother directly in the face, Buffy replies “You’re right. Thank you,” and for an instant Joyce believes she has gotten through, but when Buffy follows it up with “Goodbye,” we know from the expression on Joyce’s face what decision Buffy has made. As the scene cuts back to the basement, Buffy attacks the demon and slays it in a matter of seconds, driving her fist into its midsection and ripping out its innards, the same method she uses to slay the monster Adam in “Primeval” (4.21).

[12] How are we to understand Buffy’s decision? If she has no rational grounds for making it, then on what basis does she act? An important insight into her choice situation and motivation can be found in an unexpected source: William James’ classic essay “The Will to Believe.”^[5] James wrote his essay in 1896 in part as a response to W.K. Clifford’s claim that “it is wrong always, everywhere and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (370). The two key concepts for James in answering Clifford’s challenge are a genuine belief-option and our willing or passionate nature. According to James, we are justified in believing and acting on the basis of our “willing nature” only if the choice-situation (1) involves a genuine belief-option and (2) cannot be settled on rational grounds. A genuine belief-option is one that is living, forced, and momentous. For James, options are of several kinds: living or dead, forced or avoidable, and momentous or trivial. A living option is one that appeals to the agent as a real possibility. If you ask me to choose between the Red Sox and the Yankees, that is a dead option because I’m a White Sox fan. But if you ask me to choose between realism and antirealism, that is a living option because I’m a philosopher interested in the issues surrounding this choice. A forced option is one that is unavoidable. If the choice on the ballot before me is Democratic or Republican, that’s not a forced option because I can choose neither. But if the choice is to register to vote or not, that is a forced option because there is no alternative to this disjunction. A momentous option is one where the stakes are significant, the decision is irreversible if later shown to be unwise, and the opportunity is unique and unlikely to reoccur. When Giles smothers Ben and thereby destroys the hellgod Glory in “The Gift” (5.22), he faces a momentous choice where the stakes couldn’t be higher (their lives or the life of Ben/Glory), the decision once made cannot be undone, and this is the only chance he or Buffy will likely have to destroy Glory. On the other hand, when Buffy decides to gamble on a relationship with Parker in “The Harsh Light of Day” (4.3), the choice is not momentous because the only things at stake are her feelings and self-esteem which can be repaired if hurt or damaged, the decision can be undone, and Parker is not the only fish in the sea. What James means by our “willing or passionate nature” is “not...only such deliberate volitions as may have set up habits of belief that we cannot now escape from,--I mean all such factors of belief as fear and hope, prejudice and passion, initiation and partisanship, the circumpressure of our caste and set. As a matter of fact we find ourselves believing, we hardly know how or why” (203). Our willing nature refers to the non-intellectual and non-rational factors that influence our beliefs, decisions, and actions. For James, these play a major but under-appreciated role in determining what we believe and how we act. They include some of our deepest fears and desires, emotions and passions, hopes and longings, likes and dislikes, prejudices and biases. Foreshadowing the postmodern assault on scientific and metaphysical realism later in the century, James offers the following examples of beliefs and commitments based on our willing nature:

Our faith is faith in some one else’s faith, and in the greatest matters this is the most the case. Our belief in truth itself, for instance, that there is a truth, and that our minds and it are made

for each other, what is it but a passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up? We want to have a truth; we want to believe our experiments and studies and discussions must put us in a continually better and better position towards it; and on this line we agree to fight out our thinking lives. But if a pyrrhonist sceptic asks us how we know all this, can our logic find a reply? No! Certainly it cannot. It is just one volition against another,--we willing to go in for life upon a trust or assumption which he, for his part, does not care to make. (203-4)

[13] It is now clear that Buffy's choice-situation is exactly what James describes as a genuine belief-option. It is a living option: the choices before her are very real; it is a forced option: there is no third alternative to the disjunction facing her; and it is a momentous option: the stakes are extremely high, her decision will be irreversible, and this is the only opportunity she will have to make it. It is also clear that the wellspring of Buffy's decision can only be what James calls her "passional nature." When Joyce urges her to believe in herself, to follow her heart, she gives Buffy the key to end her ambivalence and paralysis, and somehow amidst the post-resurrection alienation she has felt throughout the sixth season and the chaotic displacement she is now experiencing, Buffy is able to use this key to get in touch with her "passional nature," with the non-rational core of who she really is. Joyce's entreaty is a gift, and Buffy's acceptance an experience of grace, not in a religious sense but in the sense of receiving something unrequested and unexpected which is life-transforming. Joyce's "gift" not only brings about the narrative resolution of "Normal Again" (6.17) but marks a decisive turning point in Buffy's post-resurrection struggle to regain her fire and passion for living and reclaim her life. When she slays the demon, we see that passion in her eyes for the first time since her resurrection.

[14] Even though Buffy has relied on her passional nature to make her final decision, we do not know what causal factors have lead up to it. Nor will we ever know. Some human choices, perhaps far more than we imagine, are a mystery, and this is one of them. Besides the absence of any textual evidence, what makes a causal explanation virtually impossible is that we do not know who the real Buffy is. Is she the slayer whose passional nature we can probably reconstruct, or is she an insane young woman who has invented the slayer with qualities she can only wish she had? "Normal Again" (6.17) leaves us with this uncertainty and a deep disquiet. It also leaves us with another question: why is the scene in which Buffy slays the demon and saves her friends the penultimate and not the final scene? Immediately following this scene, the episode ends in the mental institution with Buffy lying catatonic on the floor staring blankly into space as her doctor examines her eyes and tells her grieving parents "we've lost her." The answer lies in the DVD commentary by Diego Gutierrez, the writer, and Rick Rosenthal, the director of the episode. There Gutierrez makes it clear that the final scene is included to reinforce uncertainty in the viewers. Its intent is not to settle the objectivity issue at all, which it does not do, but to dispel and offset any viewer inference that the penultimate scene confers ontological status on the Sunnydale world. It is there to remind us that though Buffy has made her choice and returned to the Sunnydale world as the slayer, this reality may still be the imaginary construction of a catatonic young woman in a mental hospital. This epistemic uncertainty has at least two major effects. First, it is one more (though a radical one, to be sure) in a long and intricate series of moves by Whedon and his writers to create an open-ended and pluralistic reading of the text. But it also has the effect, whether intentional or not, of strongly reinforcing the antirealist view of "Normal Again" by extending it to our world, the world of the viewer. Our relationship to the text is like Buffy's relationship to the two worlds. Just as she is unable to stand outside either reality to determine which is real, so we as viewers are unable to stand outside the text to determine which is real. The text is all there is. If we liken the text to the socio-cultural world in which we are immersed as knowers and agents, then our relationship to the text can be seen as a metaphor for our relationship to this matrix. It is not just Buffy who can't escape the socio-cultural world and language-game matrix. The realist paradigm is being undermined not only in the narrative world but in our world as well.

Neo-Pragmatism and the Slayer's Knowledge

[15] We have to be careful here, however. Antirealism does not entail idealism or the view that reality is the subjective creation of the human mind. *Buffy* is not an idealist text, and any suggestions in this direction should be strongly resisted. Some antirealist views reject both realism and idealism, among them the neo-pragmatism of Richard Rorty, whose epistemological views throw considerable light

on "Normal Again" and other antirealist currents in *Buffy* including the actions of the slayer.^[6] For Rorty, the world does exist independent of the mind, but the primary relationship we have with it is causal not epistemological. According to Rorty,

to say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include mental states...The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that. (*Contingency* 5-6)

For Rorty, the world that we perceive, that is given to us, is a product both of our language-games and a reality not of our own making, but the idea of the world in itself apart from human mediation, the Kantian *ding an sich* or the Sartrean *en soi*, is, for the reasons outlined in the previous section, incoherent and must be abandoned. On this view, knowledge is not a matter of representing reality correctly or establishing coherence among a set of beliefs, but rather a matter of acquiring beliefs, which are nothing but rules and habits of action, for coping with an inexorable reality. The primary epistemological concern is no longer theoretical but practical. It is no longer, as in realism, how a knower can access an objective reality to confirm a representation of the real, but rather how agents within a community can find new ways to solve real problems and improve their condition. Not all beliefs or opinions are of equal value. Some are supported by better reasons and stronger arguments than others and therefore are more likely to be successful in solving problems and facilitating action. Knowledge is a process of justification in the service of agency, a process that is necessarily fallible and open-ended. Rorty captures these features of the process when he says that

...justification is relative to an audience and...we can never exclude the possibility that some better audience might exist, or come to exist, to whom a belief that is justifiable to us would not be justifiable...There can be no such thing as an "ideal audience" before which justification would be sufficient to ensure truth, any more than there can be a largest integer. For any audience, one can imagine a better-informed audience and also a more imaginative one--an audience that has thought up hitherto-undreamt-of alternatives to the proposed belief. The limits of justification would be the limits of language, but language (like imagination) has no limits. (*Truth and Progress* 22)

By making justification relative to a certain audience, it seems that Rorty is introducing an epistemological relativism at a social or cultural level, but this interpretation would be mistaken. The relativity Rorty has in mind is descriptive or sociological not normative. An increase in the acceptance of a belief or set of beliefs among a certain audience(s) does not imply "better" beliefs or practices and vice versa. The almost universal acceptance of the Ptolemaic theory for 1300 years does not mean that it was the best account at the time. Nor, on the other hand, does the lack of support for the Copernican theory when it was first introduced show that it was inferior to the Ptolemaic model. For Rorty, as for neo-pragmatism generally, there is no surefire method or calculus within the process of justification for resolving conflict and disagreement. Like Buffy in "Normal Again" (6.17), all we can do is muddle through with what seem like the best arguments and reasons for action, and when that fails, rely on our non-rational (not irrational) or passionate nature to solve the problem. The final litmus test is whether the solution works in practice. This doesn't mean that we have suddenly acquired truth and knowledge, or that all debate and disagreement should come to an end, or that a better solution may not be discovered in the future. What it means is that a situation demanding a solution to a problem has found closure. After opting for the life and reality of the slayer, Buffy, unlike us, does not look back and question her decision, wondering whether she really is a patient in a mental institution. If taking the antidote (whether real or not) had not put an end to the other reality, then Buffy would know that her solution didn't work, and she would have to find one that did. Because it does work, the problem is solved, and it's time to move on. Because the slayer is action-oriented and unconcerned with theoretical questions having no bearing on practice, neo-pragmatism offers a very congenial framework for understanding her decisions and actions over a wide range of situations. I will give another example of this shortly and revisit this topic in the next section.

[16] Against this antirealist interpretation, Wendy Olson presents a very different view of the epistemological situation of the slayer. According to Olson, Buffy qua slayer does have a special faculty that gives her superior reasoning powers and a priori knowledge, which Olson identifies as a modernist

holdover from the Enlightenment:

Yet, on the other hand, another kind of Enlightenment rationalism is reinforced when Buffy's reason is characterized as innate and therefore superior, a predominant theme of Enlightenment rhetoric...Buffy's reason is presented as both superior and more reliable because it is forged from her nature as the slayer and thus founded on a priori knowledge. In short, the reliance by the Buffyverse on Buffy's innate slayer reasoning powers suggests a modernist worldview. (par. 15)

If Olson is right, then an antirealist reading of the text will be hard to make, at least as far as the slayer is concerned. Understanding where her interpretation goes wrong will not show the antirealist interpretation to be correct, but it will eliminate a major objection to it. Olson's interpretation is mistaken on two counts. Buffy does not get her superior reasoning powers from her slayer nature, nor does she have any Cartesian innate ideas or special faculty that give her a priori knowledge or knowledge not derived from experience. On the first point, we finally learn in "Get It Done" (7.15) what we have suspected all along: that Buffy's slayer nature is demonic in origin. It gives her not only superior physical power in the form of increased strength, stamina, and agility but also more energy, passion, and determination. It also gives her a special precognitive ability that occurs only in her dreams. These dreams, as Keller points out, are "broadly prophetic, or rather oracular, in this sense: they differ from the ensuing events in specific detail but frequently give her information she could not have known otherwise" (Keller 166). This information does not come in the form of propositional knowledge like "Jenny Calendar is not who she appears to be" or "There will be a new person in your family two years hence", but rather in the form of cryptic and opaque symbolism which Buffy has to decode. Keller suggests, and I agree with him, that these oracular dreams are ways in which Buffy is unconsciously trying to work out various problems. I think it's more accurate to regard such dreams as hypotheses that Buffy later tests and confirms rather than pieces of a priori knowledge that arise from the depths of the unconscious into her conscious mind without a trace of justification. But even if we grant a priori knowledge status to this oracular information, this is a far cry from the a priori knowledge that Olson claims Buffy possesses and which she needs to make her case.

[17] The textual evidence that Buffy's reasoning ability is unrelated to her slayer nature comes directly from "Get It Done" (7.15) when the shadowmen, the creators of the first slayer, tell Buffy: "We cannot give you knowledge. Only power...We are at the beginning. The source of your strength. The well of the slayer's power...Herein lies your truest strength. The energy of the demon. Its spirit. Its heart." Moreover, if one's slayer nature is a source of superior reasoning ability, then both Faith and Kendra would also have it, but they don't. Buffy does have a superior reasoning ability, but it's no more mysterious than that of Holmes, Poirot, or any good problem solver who has the ability to see connections between apparently discrete events, detect deception and avoid misdirection, consider hypotheses which others have overlooked, and solve the problem at hand. Her ability is practical not theoretical, and she uses this instrumental reason repeatedly throughout the seven seasons in her battle against the dark forces.

[18] Olson gives only one example from the text to show the a priori status of Buffy's knowledge (par. 16), but in fact it is a typical case of Buffy's instrumental reason at work. The example is from "Primeval" (4.21) when Buffy and the gang have been captured sneaking into the Initiative to destroy Adam, Maggie Walsh's Frankenstein creation, who has hatched a diabolical plan to create a cyber-demonoid army that will overrun the Initiative and eventually destroy the human world. According to Olson, when Buffy tells the Initiative colonel that she is the only one that can stop him now, she is appealing to a priori knowledge or knowledge she has not gained through experience. It is hard to understand how Olson can reach this conclusion given the choice situation Buffy faces and the background information that informs her decision. Once again, it is more accurate and helpful to see Buffy's claim that she is the only one that can stop Adam as a hypothesis which she hopes will work. If one wants to call this hypothesis a piece of knowledge, that's fine, just as long as this "knowledge" is understood as fallible, uncertain, and based on practical information Buffy has obtained from different empirical sources. What are her reasons? First, when Giles asks the colonel "How exactly do you plan to get close enough to remove his power source?" and the colonel replies "Hit him simultaneously with multiple taser blasters. Incapacitate him with as much voltage as we can muster," Buffy knows immediately that this strategy won't work because she has seen firsthand Adam hit with taser blasters and, as she tells the colonel, "he feeds on it. And now you're going to provide him with an all-you-can-eat buffet?" Second, she knows from Riley who has learned from Jonathan in "Superstar" (4.17) that

Adam's uranium power source is located in his midsection near his spine. Third, she knows from past encounters with Adam that under normal circumstances it will be impossible to get close enough to him to destroy his power source without dying first. He is much too powerful and dangerous a foe. And finally, she knows that Giles has just proposed an enjoining spell that, if successful, will not only greatly increase her power but also allow her to create a defense shield against Adam's weapons enabling her to get close enough to destroy his power source. For Buffy, this is the only option that has a chance of succeeding, but there's no guarantee that it will. It's a gamble not a certainty. Not only could Giles be mistaken about the efficacy of the spell, but one of the participants could make a mistake and sabotage the spell, or forces external to the participants could prevent the completion of the spell, as in fact they almost do. Far from being an example of a priori knowledge, Buffy's decision is based on empirical evidence and instrumental reasoning and remains uncertain until the end when the spell works and Adam is destroyed.

Epistemological Models

[19] That an antirealist view is implicit in "Normal Again" (6.17) and possibly in other threads and episodes^[7] should not obscure the fact that it is overshadowed by a more dominant strain of epistemological and metaphysical realism rooted not only in Enlightenment modernism but in pre-modern Greek and Christian thought. One of the primary ways in which knowledge is transmitted in *Buffy* is through the character of Rupert Giles, Buffy's watcher. Usually ineffective in guiding and controlling his headstrong slayer, Giles's primary function as watcher is to provide Buffy and the gang with vital information in their struggle against the dark forces. In "The Harvest" (1.2), with everyone gathered in the school library, Giles gives the first description in the show of the demonic and vampiric reality they are facing, an account that will be subsequently filled in and reinforced during the rest of the seven season narrative:

The world is older than any of you know, and contrary to popular mythology, it did not begin as a paradise. For untold eons demons walked the earth. They made it their home, their hell. In time they lost their purchase on this reality, and the way was made for the mortal animals, for man. All that remains of the old ones are vestiges, certain magicks, certain creatures...The books tell that the last demon to leave this reality fed off a human, mixed their blood. He was a human form possessed--infected--by a demon soul. He bit another, and another, and so they walk the earth feeding, killing some, mixing their blood with others to make more of their own kind, waiting for the animals to die out and the old ones to return.

This scene is important because it captures perfectly the epistemological and metaphysical realism that runs throughout the show. Far from being contextual or perspectival, Giles's account of the origin and nature of vampires is meant to be a true and accurate representation of the real. His description is not from any point of view other than a trans-contextual one that is intended to accurately represent the vampire species in itself unmediated by thought or language. To be sure, he has to use language to describe this reality, but the reality he is describing is faithfully represented in his description. In other words, it has an independent and objective nature made evident and explicit through the representations of language. When he says "the books tell," he is not presenting a description from a particular historical point of view, but rather providing confirmation of his description by handing one of the books to Xander to verify his interpretation of the text. This suggests an important model of justification that Giles and the Scoobies use throughout the show in their search for knowledge: an appeal to textual authority. The knowledge that Giles is transmitting to the Scoobies is knowledge that has been transmitted to him through various esoteric and authoritative texts. Moreover, since these texts are the property of the Watchers' Council and Giles is using them as part of his job as Buffy's watcher, this knowledge is also institutional. Acquired over generations and kept safe and secret by the council, this knowledge is the council's most valuable resource in its struggle against the dark forces. If challenged, Giles will appeal to one or more of these texts for justification but not beyond. Just as important, Buffy and the gang also accept this authority, so that research always involves searching for but never questioning the evidence in the texts. An important realist assumption of the show is that the information presented in these texts is trustworthy, that it faithfully represents reality. Not all of the texts consulted by Giles are reliable. Some are prophetic texts or have prophetic parts and, of these, some are unreliable because Buffy has thwarted their prophecies in the past; however, some, such as the Codex, are never wrong ("Prophecy Girl" 1.12). While the Codex accurately prophesies Buffy's death, its account is incomplete, since Buffy is revived by Xander after drowning. Presumably the non-

prophetic historical texts to which Giles and the Scoobies appeal for knowledge are reliable in the same way as the Codex: they provide accurate representations of reality but may ignore or overlook salient features of that which is represented. The knowledge transmitted by the text, though accurate and reliable, may be incomplete or partial. The realist theory of knowledge operates then at two levels: at the level where Giles, Willow, or someone else transmits knowledge from the text to the rest of the gang, and at the justificatory level where the authority of the text is taken for granted.

[20] This raises an important question. Giles's expert knowledge arises out a tradition, and a tradition need not be committed to a realist epistemology. Neo-pragmatism, for instance, is strongly indebted to an earlier pragmatist tradition created by Peirce, Dewey, James, and Mead that is highly critical of realist (and idealist) theories of knowledge. But Giles's knowledge does not arise out of a tradition that rejects the correspondence theory of truth and a realist theory of knowledge, but rather out of the tradition of the Watchers' Council for whom historical knowledge, codified in numerous reliable texts, is seen as revelatory of an objective and independent reality. Two sorts of evidence support this interpretation: negative and positive. The negative evidence consists in the fact that there is no mention throughout the seven seasons of the show that the historical knowledge upon which Giles and the Watchers' Council depend is fallible, questionable, or just plain wrong. Nor is there any suggestion that such knowledge reflects any theoretical, ideological, or political bias, vested interest, or pneumatic distortion or construction. On the positive side, it is not only Giles who accepts the textual word unquestioningly but also Wesley Wyndham-Pryce, Buffy's new watcher in season three, and Gwendolyn Post, former watcher turned rogue in "Revelations" (3.7). This suggests that Giles's commitment to a realist epistemology with regard to historical knowledge is not idiosyncratic but part of a much larger institutional tradition. It is one of the major ironies of the show that historical knowledge, the most dubitable and fallible of all forms of putative knowledge, is presented as one of the most reliable.

[21] This epistemological model is used throughout the show as the source of some of the most important knowledge needed by Buffy and the gang. For example, as "The Harvest" suggests, it is the major source of knowledge concerning the ontology of species in the Buffyverse, a view that Buffy accepts uncritically and has a profound effect on her treatment of humans and vampires, especially Spike. In "Prophecy Girl" (1.12) it provides vital information about the Master's rising; in "Amends" (3.10) it explains Angel's expulsion from the hell dimension and reveals the nature and existence of the First Evil and its harbingers, the Bringers, a knowledge that will prove critical in season seven; in "Earshot" (3.18) it identifies the demon whose blood has infected Buffy and discloses the antidote to cure her telepathic madness; in "The Prom" (3.20) Willow's stolen pages from "The Books of Ascension" reveal the Mayor's plan to transform into a demon which Giles textually identifies later in "Graduation Day, Part One" (3.21); in the same episode it gives Buffy (with the help of Oz and Willow) the knowledge of the antidote to counteract Faith's poisoning of Angel that sets in motion a chain of events with lasting effects in *Buffy* and *Angel*; in "Checkpoint" (5.12) it is the source of the knowledge Quentin Travers, the head of the Watchers' Council, gives to Buffy about the true nature of Glory; in "Villains" (6.20) it allows Willow to transform into the powerful "Dark Willow" when she absorbs all of the knowledge in the Black Arts texts. Often supplementing the reliance on texts is the reliance on the authority of individual testimony other than that of Giles and Travers. For example, in "Surprise" (2.13) Angel identifies the severed arm in the box as that of the Judge and provides crucial information about that specific demon; in "Graduation Day, Part One" (3.21) Anya gives an eye-witness account of a human/demon ascension and sheds further light on the nature of the demon the mayor hopes to become; in "Fool for Love" (5.7), hoping to avoid the fate of other slayers, Buffy learns from Spike the secret of how he was able to kill two of them; in "Spiral" (5.20) the leader of the Byzantine knights gives Buffy and Dawn new and invaluable information about Glory and the key. Though relying on individual testimony rather than texts, the model of knowledge is the same. It is based on authority, the authority is unquestioned, and the words of the authority are seen as representing real states of affairs in the world.

[22] This interpretation runs counter to a view among some *Buffy* scholars that the primary epistemological conflict in the narrative is between an orthodox view represented in the first three seasons by the institutional rationalism of the high school and in the fourth season by the scientific rationalism of the Initiative and an unorthodox view represented by the esoteric and occult knowledge of Giles and the Scoobies. Pateman, for instance, contrasts Giles's knowledge, which he describes as

"heterodox, aesthetically rich, irrational in content but open to rational inquiry" with the "official, orthodox, rational knowledge" of modernist institutions like the American high school. He describes the Initiative as "an example of scientific rationalism...opposed, explicitly, to the occult, irrational world of knowledge used by Buffy" (Pateman 34). To be sure, there is an important difference in the quality of their respective knowledge about the chaotic world beneath the Hellmouth. Because of their access to the esoteric texts of Giles and the institutional knowledge of the Watchers' Council, Buffy and her posse do possess a privileged knowledge of the demonic world unavailable to the modern representatives of scientific rationalism. Even if the latter did have access to these secret sources of knowledge, they would probably react with skepticism and denial. Though its primary purpose is to capture, study, and experiment on various demon species, the Initiative is committed to a neo-Cartesian ideology that regards all demons as irrational beings without language and an interior life ("The I in Team" 4.13) and would dismiss as nonsense the understanding of demonic reality shared by Giles and the Scoobies. Despite these differences, each camp is committed to an epistemological realism that relies on institutional authority for the acquisition, transmission, and justification of knowledge. Where Sunnydale High and UC Sunnydale rely on the authority of teachers and texts and the Initiative on the authority of Maggie Walsh, her team of scientists, and the bureaucratic chain of command, Buffy and her posse rely on the authority of Giles, the Watchers' Council, and their esoteric texts. Moreover, each camp regards its knowledge as certain not probable and revelatory of an independent reality (the real as it is in itself) unmediated by human language and culture.

[23] This realist model is not the only one used to fight the dark forces. As suggested in part two, there is another mode of knowledge, but as a rule it is not used by Giles or the group but mostly by Buffy acting on her own and relying on her own resources. When used by the group, it is because Buffy cannot do it all on her own and needs their help. This interpretation also runs counter to a view among some Buffy commentators that the primary epistemological model represented by Buffy and the gang is a relational or intersubjective one in which knowledge arises from the collective research and work of the group. Daspit, for instance, calls this a "postmodern collective and relational view of knowledge/education" in which the object of knowledge is created through a collective effort and process that is nonauthoritarian and nonhierarchical (Daspit 129). The major problem with this interpretation is that as a generalization it is false because it applies only to a handful of situations, most of which involve the necessity of cooperative brainstorming and effort to defeat the season's big bad because Giles's texts offer no help in this regard and Buffy cannot do it herself. Though we see this intersubjective model at work in "Graduation Day: Part Two" (3.22) to defeat Mayor Wilkins, in "Primeval" (4.21) to defeat Adam, in "The Gift" (5.22) to defeat Glory, and in "Chosen" (7.22) to defeat the vampire army of the First, it is clearly a strategy of last resort. It is also important to realize that this model does not apply to research situations like those in "The Harvest" (1.2) where a cooperative and collective approach to research gives the appearance of rejecting a modernist epistemology but in fact is subservient to it. The research is cooperative only in the sense of trying to cover as much ground as possible to discover an answer that is pre-given in one or more of the texts; it is not collective in the sense in which Daspit means it, where each participant contributes something important to a constructive piece of shared knowledge.

[24] Whenever possible, Buffy patrols and fights alone. She does so not only because she is the slayer but because she doesn't want to endanger her friends or have her concentration and ability compromised by worrying about them. As early as "The Harvest" (1.2), Buffy strikes this theme loud and clear when she tells Xander who wants to join her in the search for his friend Jesse "There is no 'we.' I'm the slayer, and you're not." This statement resonates across the seven seasons of the show as Buffy does most of the important work alone, solves most of the critical problems alone, and acquires most of the knowledge necessary to solve these problems alone. To give some noteworthy examples from just one season: in "Primeval" (4.21) she catches Spike in a verbal slip-up which uncovers his betrayal and enables her to reunite the gang after a bitter breakup; in "Hush" (4.10) she uses the "knowledge" from the spirit-girl in her dream to scream at the top of her lungs to destroy the fairytale monsters The Gentlemen; in "The I in Team" (4.13) she recognizes her two demon attackers in the sewer as prisoners of the Initiative and realizes that Maggie Walsh has betrayed her; in "A New Man" (4.12) she realizes at the last second that the Fyarl demon she is about to slay is actually Giles who has been transformed into a demon by Ethan Rayne; in "Living Conditions" (4.2) she alone suspects that her new college roommate is a demon because her toenail clippings continue to grow; in "Restless" (4.22) only she among the four dreamers realizes that the First Slayer is a dream spirit and can be defeated by

waking up. If we look at the other seasons, we find the same pattern: Buffy does most of the work and acquires most of the problem-solving knowledge on her own. This is not to say that the cooperative model does not occasionally come into play. It does, but it is overshadowed by the model of the solitary slayer. As we have already seen in the analysis of the epistemological situation in "Primeval," there is no diegetic obstacle to interpreting Buffy's acquisition of knowledge in most of these situations in pragmatic and antirealist terms. If we understand the "knowledge" she acquires as the formulation of tentative hypotheses and her subsequent actions as testing these hypotheses in practice, then the knowledge that guides her actions is at best only probable and always capable of being revised or overthrown. On this model, Buffy is the quintessential pragmatist, seeking solutions to practical problems, formulating possible answers (hypotheses), testing them in practice, and searching for a new solution if the original one doesn't work. What makes this instrumental knowledge antirealist is its experiential, fallible, and contextual nature and the fact that it makes no appeal to any legitimating authority, whether it be a special faculty of reason or intuition or an external touchstone.

[25] Giles and Buffy are not the only central epistemological figures in *Buffy*; there is also Willow, her relationship to magic, and her evolution as a powerful sorceress. Though the subject of numerous critical studies, Willow's use of magic is of interest here only as it relates to the epistemological issue of realism and antirealism. Like Buffy, Willow usually works alone, but sometimes in tandem with others when she needs their assistance, as in the enjoining spell in "Primeval" (4.21), the resurrection spell in "Bargaining, Part One" (6.1), and the portal spell in "Get It Done" (7.15). Though she may need their assistance and even participation, it is her knowledge and power that draws on the elements of the Buffyverse to create the spell. As a witch novice in seasons two through four, Willow follows the realist paradigm set up in "The Harvest" (1.2) as she learns her craft from Giles and his esoteric texts and whatever other sources she can find. But by season five in "Out of my Mind" (5.4), as Nylin points out (par. 46), she has gone beyond the stage of just reproducing the spells of others, and by seasons six and seven, as seen in Buffy's resurrection spell in "Bargaining, Part One" (6.1), the portal spell to bring Buffy back from her visitation with the shadowmen in "Get It Done" (7.15), and in the scythe spell to empower the potentials in "Chosen" (7.22), she is "well beyond the stage of passive learning from her predecessors: she is finding new knowledge" (par. 47). At this point the epistemological situation becomes murky and ambiguous. On the one hand, Willow's knowledge is practical not theoretical, a "knowing how" rather than a "knowing that." It is also creative in bringing about a new knowledge and an emergent reality not seen before. In addition, its success is only probable and never certain. As pragmatic, constructive, and fallible, it has strong antirealist elements. On the other hand, its success depends on knowing how to use the natural laws of the Buffyverse to carry out the spell, as Willow makes clear in the following exchange with Dawn from "Get It Done" (7.15):

Dawn: Willow, how would you get Buffy back?

Willow: That's what I'm saying, I don't even know.

Dawn: Ok, but if another witch was to do it, where would she start?

Willow: Physics, principles, basic laws.

Dawn: Such as?

Willow: Conservation of energies. You can't really create or destroy anything, just transfer ...
Magic works off physics.

This exchange is important because it shows not only that magic depends on physics, but reveals one of the fundamental laws of the Buffyverse, the principle of the conservation of energy, which is also one of the basic laws of Newtonian mechanics, a paradigmatic theory, if ever there was one, of scientific realism. It also offers an important insight, as Jennifer Ouellette explains, into how Willow creates her magic:

Small wonder that Willow, the stellar science student, develops into such a powerful Wiccan. She understands that magic has its own set of rules that must be followed as rigorously as the laws of physics. There are loopholes and ingenious ways to "trick" those laws every now and then—the basis for all technological innovation—but even with magic, you can't cheat the universe. You have to play by the rules. (68)

Willow is more like a creative artisan or technician than an artist: she has to play by the rules determined by the laws and principles governing the natural world, but within the parameters set by these rules, she can be innovative and creative. The critical question is whether these rules and laws are realist or antirealist, whether they are theory-and-observation-independent or theory-and-observation-dependent. If the former, then Willow's use of magic implies a scientific and metaphysical realism, and her knowledge, however innovative and creative, would have strong if not dominant realist elements. On the other hand, if these rules and laws are merely inductive inferences based on observed and statistical regularities, then her knowledge would be strongly antirealist. On this question the narrative evidence is unclear and indecisive. For example, even though the law of the conservation of energy is a fundamental principle of the Buffyverse, it remains an open question whether this law (and the other laws of physics) should be interpreted in realist or antirealist terms.[\[8\]](#)

[26] Since these different approaches to knowledge, the realist and the antirealist, are incompatible, we would expect them to conflict in practice, and in fact they do, giving rise to one of the major and most controversial threads of the last three seasons: Buffy's ambivalent and tumultuous relationship with Spike. On the one hand, the slayer accepts the realist ontology of species presented by Giles and the Watchers' Council, according to which vampires are soul-less demons in human form, which means, among other things, that they lack the capacity to become a moral agent, and that implies being unable to have a conscience, to feel guilt or remorse, to have a sense of duty, and to act with moral intention. Though vampires are human/demon hybrids, they retain only the memories and dominant personality traits of the former human being but not the essential core or identity of that being. Since humans are the only species in the Buffyverse with this moral capacity, it follows that demons and vampires are morally inferior to humans, such that even the most despicable human being (like Warren) has a higher moral status than a benign and peaceful demon (like Clem). If Clem had lost his mind and gone on a rampage like Warren, Buffy would have had no moral qualms in slaying him, just as she tries to do with Anya when she murders a group of fraternity men as a restored vengeance demon in "Selfless" (7.5). But she refuses to take similar steps against Warren, explaining to Dawn and Xander that dispensing human justice is not her job ("Villains," 6.20). On the other hand, Buffy experiences firsthand Spike's empathy, compassion, loyalty, and sense of duty, first in season five (pre-resurrection) as he commiserates with her on her back porch as she cries over her mother's illness in "Fool for Love" (5.7), saves her life from Drusilla in "Crush" (5.14), endures a painful beating from Glory and risks his life to protect Dawn (for whom he will later develop a strong paternal feeling) in "Intervention" (5.18), and fights at Buffy's side against the hellgod Glory in "The Gift" (5.22), and later in season six (post-resurrection) as he becomes her trusted friend and confidant in "Afterlife" (6.3) and, after saving her from self-immolation in "Once More with Feeling" (6.7), her lover. For Buffy, the conflict plays out concretely as she alternates between treating Spike as a soul-less vampire whom she finds loathsome and disgusting and as a trusted friend and ally.

[27] Yet in the end, the realist view of Giles and the Watchers' Council prevails. As Olson makes clear in her trenchant critique of the Buffy/Spike dynamic (par. 27), the realist view has already won the day in "Crush" (5.14), "Smashed" (6.9) and "Dead Things" (6.13), well before Spike's attempted rape of Buffy in "Seeing Red" (6.19) which becomes the catalyst for Spike to seek ensoulment, thus insuring the victory of the realist paradigm.[\[9\]](#) Beyond Olson's perceptive moral and political critique of the show, with which I have no quarrel, the bizarre resolution of this conflict has serious aesthetic flaws which weaken even further the last two seasons. Put simply, the resolution is not believable on a narrative level. For nearly two seasons prior to Spike's ensoulment, we (and Buffy) are given consistent and compelling evidence that he is a moral agent, capable of empathy, compassion, love, loyalty, and a strong sense of duty, only to have this view overthrown by an attempted rape that is totally out of character and makes no sense, except as an artificial device to insure the triumph of the realist paradigm. Moreover, for six seasons of the show, the slayer has shown remarkable insight and sensitivity to the moral complexity of her world, only to have that evaporate as she is unable to see what's right in front of her eyes. Of course, a likely explanation for her moral blindness is that since her resurrection, she has not been herself and has not fully recovered her powers, but this fails to explain her myopia in pre-resurrection season five. The lack of a full recovery notwithstanding, it is hard to understand her transformation from a sensitive and insightful moral agent into a dogmatic ideologue who continues to elevate the human species over all other species despite convincing evidence to the contrary. One cannot shake the feeling that the agenda has been set from season one. Despite the subversive currents of antirealism throughout the show, the realist paradigm articulated by Giles in "The

Harvest" (1.2) remains dominant in the end.[\[10\]](#)

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[\[1\]](#) The one notable exception to this reversibility is the continued existence of Dawn and the permanent implantation of memories of her in Buffy, Joyce, and the rest of the gang. The latter is confirmed in "The Weight of the World" (5.21) when Buffy, having suffered a catatonic breakdown, is trapped in a feedback loop of false memories in which her parents bring baby Dawn home and Buffy (as a little girl) holds her for the first time.

[2] Most notably "Nightmares" (1.10), "Halloween" (2.6), "Band Candy" (3.6), "The Wish" (3.9), "Gingerbread" (3.11), "Doppelgängerland" (3.16), "Something Blue" (4.9), "Where the Wild Things Are" (4.18), "The Replacement" (5.3), "Once More with Feeling" (6.7), "Same Time, Same Place" (7.3), and "Conversations with Dead People" (7.7).

[3] As the history of modern philosophy has shown, adopting a realist model of knowledge will lead to radical skepticism if the third condition of the realist definition in paragraph 5 is not met. Since this condition is impossible to meet (see the discussion in the text), skepticism is an inevitable consequence of realism. Descartes attempts to overcome this skepticism with some mental gymnastics in the Third Meditation but fails; Hume's epistemology leads straight to skepticism, sounding the death knell of British empiricism; and Kant tries to save the model by finding a middle ground between idealism and realism and introducing the distinction between phenomena (the known and knowable) and noumena (the unknown and unknowable). Once Hegel sees the absurdity of the Kantian *ding an sich* and the phenomenal/noumenal distinction, we are on the way to a full-fledged idealism. Realism and skepticism are two sides of the same coin, and idealism is a reaction against both.

[4] See Ouellette, pp. 184-190 for a discussion of how the Many Worlds Interpretation might apply to Buffy's situation in "Normal Again" (6.17). Although her discussion is suggestive, it sensibly falls short of endorsing this interpretation.

[5] If *Buffy* can be interpreted in part as a pragmatic text, as I argue later in the paper, then it is hardly coincidental that William James also happens to be one of the founders (along with Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey) of American pragmatism. For further consideration of the relevance of James's pragmatism to *Buffy*, see Munsterbjorn, pp. 97-102.

[6] Neo-pragmatism refers to the revival of classical pragmatism among contemporary philosophers such as Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, Robert Brandom, Jürgen Habermas, and Richard Bernstein. For an excellent overview of this movement, see Bernstein.

[7] It can be argued, though I won't attempt it here, that a strong antirealist theme is also present in the alternate reality/deception threads involving Dawn in season five and Jonathan in "Superstar" (4.17). In both threads Buffy and her companions are unable to detect the deception by means of any special faculty or epistemic criterion. In neither thread are they able or does it make any sense to adopt a trans-cultural (or "objective") vantage point from which they can discern the real from the illusory. In both threads the deception is uncovered from within the alternate reality. In the case of Dawn, it is Buffy's fortuitous encounter with a dying monk (who also helped to create Dawn) that reveals the deception. In "Superstar" it is Jonathan's error in judgment about the potential danger of a demon that leads Buffy to question his infallibility, resulting eventually in the unraveling of the alternate reality. It remains an open question whether similar antirealist currents can be seen in the other alternate reality/deception episodes mentioned in note 2 above.

[8] In her discussion of the causal laws of the Buffyverse, Munsterbjorn flirts with an antirealist interpretation when she says "Buffyverse rules are probabilistic rather than deterministic; they represent what happens most of the time, rather than all of the time" (96). Though I believe she is correct, this stops short of an antirealist interpretation because probabilistic causal laws are still compatible with scientific realism. What needs to be added is that these probabilistic laws are observation-and-theory-dependent.

[9] What I call the triumph of realism Olson calls the victory of Enlightenment rationalism. For me, it remains an open question whether Buffy's beliefs concerning vampires and demons in general and Spike in particular are based on a rationalist or empiricist theory of knowledge, or a combination of both, though I suspect the latter (see pars. 19 and 20).

[10] Although he uses the language of ontology and not epistemology, Scott McLaren disagrees that realism or the reified view of the soul gains "final ascendancy" in *Buffy* (par. 29). According to McLaren, neither the existential/metaphorical nor the reified/literal view of the soul can claim victory. Although his account is complicated by the fact that he is considering the view of the soul in both *Buffy* and *Angel*, the narrative makes it clear that Spike's ensoulment is literal not metaphorical: the soul that he gains is an actual entity or substance that restores his human identity (as far as this is possible within a vampire) and imbues him with a moral capacity previously lacking as a pure vampire. It is difficult to see how the triumph of realism could be any less ambiguous.