To Live and Die in the 'Verse: A Re-evaluation of Inara

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[1] One of the many things that make a Joss Whedon show so compelling is the way that it rewards multiple viewings. As new facts about the characters' backstories emerge in later seasons, they cast a whole new light on our re-viewing of those same characters during earlier seasons. All the more the shame, then, that *Firefly* was cancelled after only one season. Though the series has continued in the form of a few more stories in graphic novel form, for the most part, we can only imagine what we might have learned about the show's central characters and how that would have affected watching the first season again, now with the benefit of hindsight. In one case, however, we need not merely imagine. In the 2012 television special on the ten-year anniversary of *Firefly* ("Firefly: Browncoats Unite"), executive producer Tim Minear revealed a fascinating but previously undeveloped element of *Firefly*'s backstory: though it has not yet surfaced during the events of the series, movie, or graphic novels, Inara is suffering from terminal cancer. In this paper, I propose to re-evaluate Inara in light of this fact, in order to see what implications it has for her character, her behavior, and her relationships. I will begin by examining Inara's authenticity or lack thereof, framed primarily within the context of the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. As Sartre's concepts of authenticity and inauthenticity are established largely in terms of honesty and dishonesty (respectively), I will then consider Inara from an ethical point of view, analyzing her behavior and relationships in terms of the ethics of Immanuel Kant, as well as the Kantian-like aspects of Thomas Mappes' and John Locke's views, all of whom place a great deal of emphasis on the notion of respect for our fellow human beings, especially in terms of honesty in ethical human interaction.

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Authenticity: Sartre's Philosophy and Its Implications for Inara

[2] It is difficult to discuss Sartre's views on personal autonomy without delving into his sometimes convoluted metaphysics, a full discussion of which could take many pages. However, a brief overview will suffice for my purposes here. As an existentialist, Sartre denies that there are such things as objective, universal, human-independent essences that constitute what things necessarily are. Rather, things simply are, they exist, and their supposed essences are invented and defined after that fact (thus, the core idea among various forms of existentialism that "existence precedes essence"). As a consequence, there is no specific property of a thing that is an essential one. All properties are "accidental," and could easily be removed or changed without essentially changing the thing that has those properties. This means that at its core, any particular thing is nothing more than brute, undifferentiated being; "Being-In-Itself," to use Sartre's term. It is a kind of pure existence that is not necessarily or essentially any specific kind of thing, but just the simple actuality of the thing, or "facticity" as Sartre calls it. However, there is also another kind of being: "Being-For-Itself." To simplify, Being-For-Itself is basically the subjectivity of active human consciousness. According to Sartre, Being-For-Itself is characterized by a kind of "transcendence," in which the consciousness is something over and above any particular object or content of that consciousness. One's consciousness, in a sense, is a kind of pure potentiality, in that it can shape itself to whatever it chooses to contemplate, a nothingness that can become anything that it chooses it to be (Sartre 3-32, 33-85). [1]

[3] As a result of this, Sartre denies that there is any essential, necessary human nature that objectively and universally defines what a human being is or what a human being ought to be. People simply come into existence and then define themselves after the fact. A direct implication of this is that, according to Sartre, we human beings are all born perfectly free. We are free to choose and to be whatever we decide, and we are not constrained by any supposed limitations of human nature, much less any objective external nature. However, this radical freedom also entails a radical responsibility. According to Sartre, we are what we choose, and so we are also solely responsible for what we are and what

we choose. We cannot blame facts about human nature for who we are. There is no inherent moral order of the universe to constrain our choices. We cannot even blame our upbringing or societal pressures for the person that we are at this moment. At any given time, we are free to decide whatever we so decide, without limit, and thus no one bears responsibility for those decisions but ourselves (Sartre 559-711). Unfortunately, this total responsibility is too much for most people to bear. One need only consider how difficult it seems for most people to take responsibility for their most trivial mistakes or bad behaviors, and then imagine telling people that they are absolutely responsible for everything they do and everything they are. For most people, this sense of responsibility is overwhelming, and in order to cope, they engage in various kinds of thinking that Sartre refers to as "bad faith"; that is, choosing and acting while denying that they bear the responsibility for it. A common way for people to do this is through various religious or philosophical views. For example, some people invent religious notions of God as Law-Giver, who "forces" them to act according to some externally validated set of moral and theological rules. Other people invent various philosophical ideas about human nature that supposedly constrain their choices, as per the tendency of ancient Greek thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle to define humans as rational creatures, and then claim that the "right" way to live one's life is in accordance with reason in some manner. Instead of living in bad faith in one way or the other, Sartre advocates what he calls living in "good faith": that is, living in a manner consistent with a sense of freedom and responsibility—living *authentically*. Since we have no external constraints on our choices—no external Law-Giver to tell us that our projects are or are not consistent with His Divine Plan, no objective, universal morality to judge our projects as "good" or "evil, no human nature to tell us that our projects are "natural" or "unnatural"—we may choose whatever projects we see fit, committing ourselves to them fully, and taking full responsibility for these projects (Sartre 86-118).

[4] The Whedon corpus provides us with a variety of characters exemplifying various kinds and degrees of authenticity (or the lack thereof), *Firefly* / *Serenity* not the least among them (See Richardson and Rabb). As Foy and Kowalski have argued convincingly, the Operative

instantiates a complete lack of authenticity. He has abdicated all autonomy to the Alliance, doing their bidding with "uncritical acceptance[. . . .] He has willingly accepted the subordination of his own sense of right and wrong via an unquestioned loyalty to the state. Abandoning his personal freedom, he is no longer responsible for the acts he labels as evil" (156-7). Sartre, were he alive and a fan of *Firefly / Serenity,* would likely agree with this assessment. In Sartre's terms, the Operative's life, as depicted in *Serenity*, is one riddled with bad faith. He has decided to let an external agency, with its own value system, determine his projects for him. He deceives himself into believing that, because the Alliance supposedly makes his choices for him, he does not make any real choices himself and therefore does not bear real responsibility for his actions. However, this is obviously not the case, since he clearly chose to become an Operative of the Alliance, and he continually chooses to follow their orders, no matter how repugnant. It is only at the very end of *Serenity* that he seems to come to some awareness of this responsibility, choosing to abandon his role as Operative and strike out on his own (some of which we later see in the *Leaves on the Wind* graphic novel). Other *Firefly* characters, on the other hand, appear largely authentic, as Foy notes: Mal, who "owns his own beliefs—the few that he does have," and Simon Tam, who "is the quintessential picture of authenticity," giving up everything that he has to commit to the project of saving his sister River (157, 159; and see Richardson and Rabb 141-43). Again, Sartre would likely agree. After the war, Mal loses his faith in God and the ideals of political allegiance, instead choosing to believe in himself and his crew, those to whom he decides to commit himself. Simon also exemplifies good faith by rejecting his political, professional, and other familial relationships in order to save and care for his sister, come what may of this choice.

[5] So how does Inara compare? Where does she fall on the continuum of bad faith (as with the Operative) to authenticity (as with Mal and Simon)? Though not speaking explicitly in terms of Sartre and authenticity, Tait Szabo has pointed out aspects of Inara's behavior, as well as her profession, which seem less than fully genuine, dying or not. As Mal points out to her in the episode "Shindig" (1.4), Companionship itself often involves some bad faith on the part of everyone involved:

"All this, the lie of it. That man parading you around as if he actually won you. As if he loves you. And everyone here going along with it." Christina Rowley makes a similar observation through the example of the conversation between Inara and her female client in "War Stories" (1.10) when they agree that "one can never be oneself in the company of men." (See also Cynthea Masson on Inara's rhetoric and the appearance of honesty with this female client, 22-23; and see Andrew Aberdein on "deceit" versus "autonomy" of the Companions, 74-75.) As Szabo also points out, there is also the inauthenticity of Inara's supposedly libertarian views of sex that are exacerbated by her inauthentic view of her relationship with Mal. In "Heart of Gold" (1.13), Inara is greatly upset with the liaison between Mal and her friend and former Companion Nandi, despite claiming that she is not "puritanical" about sex; clearly, given her feelings about Mal (and her failure to admit them, not only to him, but to herself to some degree), she is less than a perfect sexual libertarian, as Rowley notes (see also Lackey 69 and Amy-Chinn).

[6] These examples bring out what is central to bad faith and inauthenticity, according to Sartre: namely, deception, whether that of another or oneself. Sartre brings this out nicely through a hypothetical example:

> Take the example of a woman who has consented to go out with a particular man for the first time. She knows very well the intentions which the man who is speaking to her cherishes regarding her. She knows also that it will be necessary sooner or later for her to make a decision. But she does not want to realize the urgency; she concerns herself only with what is respectful and discreet in the attitude of her companion. (96)

The young woman (as well as the young man, as Sartre then goes on to point out) is playing a game, as it were, in which she is deceiving both herself and the young man about the real purpose of their date. This very closely parallels Mal's criticism of the dance in "Shindig." Atherton and Inara are acting as though they are an actual, romantically-involved couple, rather than merely a Companion and client, and they are playing a similar game at even higher stakes as Atherton attempts to "woo" Inara into staying on with him as a full-time Companion while Inara

does her best to avoid making a decision that offer. "You're a generous man," says Inara, as a respectful and discreet way of refusing to answer Atherton. "That is not a 'yes'," he points out, to which she replies, "It's not a 'no' either," again refusing to make a clear decision one way or the other.

[7] These sorts of examples suggest that Inara is already less than honest with herself about what she does and how she feels about it, and that her bad faith is constituted by a lack of total honesty with herself and those around her. This seems further complicated by the fact that she is aware of her own imminent mortality. For one thing, it seriously casts doubt on her purported reasons for taking up with the crew of Serenity. During both "Shindig" (as previously mentioned) and in a flashback in "Out of Gas" (1.8), Inara claims that she has entered into this arrangement as a business strategy, in order to expand her client base. But she herself indicates that she is aware that such an arrangement may at least on occasion make it difficult for her to keep her appointments. Furthermore, there is never any indication that Companions who work solely within the Central Planets have any trouble finding clients, or that there would be any difficulty in finding more typical commercial passage to those Outer Planets which might make a home to the sorts of people who could afford the services of a registered Companion. One gets the impression early on that it is more than just business. On initial viewings, one might suspect that Inara simply prefers the extra autonomy or adventure such an arrangement affords. With the benefit of the revelation of her impending death, one cannot help but hypothesize that Inara is simply running away from something, perhaps making it easier on herself to deny her condition when away from close friends and colleagues.

[8] In addition, her terminal condition calls into question the authenticity of her relationships with others, particularly Mal. There is every indication during the final scenes of *Serenity* that Inara has decided to stay with the crew, and with Mal in particular, with the implication that the two of them have admitted their feelings for one another to themselves, and that they are on the verge of admitting them to one another, presumably for the purpose of pursing a relationship (and as confirmed in the *Leaves on the Wind* graphic novel). A romantic

relationship is very much a "project" in Sartre's terms, but arguably a "bad faith" project if one is already aware of the very limited duration of such a relationship, and even less arguably, if one has not been forthcoming with one's potential romantic partner about that fact. One might argue that, though perhaps not totally forthcoming, Inara's choices here are not really in bad faith, since she did not choose her illness. Sartre, however, would disagree. Dealing with a similar objection, he writes:

> Someone will say, "I did not ask to be born." This is a naïve way of throwing greater emphasis on our facticity. I am responsible for everything, in fact, except for my very responsibility, for I am not the foundation of my being. Therefore everything takes place as if I were compelled to be responsible[. . . .] I find an absolute responsibility for the fact that my facticity (here the fact of my birth) is directly inapprehensible and even inconceivable, for this fact of my birth never appears as a brute fact but always across a projective reconstruction of my for-itself. I am ashamed of being born or I am astonished at it or I rejoice over it, or in attempting to get rid of my life I affirm that I live and I assume this life as bad. Thus in a certain sense I *choose* being born. (709)

[9] Put more plainly, Sartre is claiming that I do, in some very real sense, choose basic, unavoidable facts about myself, such as that of my birth, or that of a terminal illness. These supposedly brute facts about myself are never really experienced subjectively as mere facts, but are bound up in all sorts of beliefs and value judgments that I make about those facts. Inara may not have chosen to be terminally ill, but she does choose how to think and feel about it, and, more importantly, how to act based on it. In the sense that she continues to make choices about how to live her life and what kind of relationships in which to engage that involve some level of deception, of others or herself, then those choices are still made in bad faith.

[10] So in these ways, Inara seems less than fully authentic, and this lack of authenticity is exacerbated by her terminal condition, contributing as it apparently does to her self-deception about her career, her current strategy for pursuing it, and her relationships. Moreover, this casts her interactions and relationships with others in a decidedly

less than flattering light ethically speaking, insofar as her self-deception also entails a deception of those others. It is to this aspect of her character that we now turn.

Ethics: Kant, Inara, and Respect for Persons

[11] The upper echelons of the history of ethics are reserved for a chosen few, perhaps chief among them Immanuel Kant, who stands as a proponent of a deontological approach to ethics. That is to say, Kant believes that what makes an action right or wrong is something independent of its practical consequences—the end does not justify the means, and the proof is decidedly not in the pudding. According to Kant, an action is morally right insofar as it conforms to a general moral principle that he calls the Categorical Imperative. Kant explains this principle in a number of ways, but for our purposes here, the most relevant is the so-called Second Formulation: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person on in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means" (421). On this formulation, what morality requires of us is that we treat human beings as having a special kind of value and dignity that is deserving of respect. This value comes from the fact that (according to Kant) we alone in the world are rational, autonomous beings—we can think and choose for ourselves. Everything else in the world is mere "stuff," to be used for human ends. But people are not things to be used as means to ends; people are ends in themselves, precisely because they, as rational autonomous beings, have ends. As such, humans are the source of value in the world, and are thus deserving of being treated as having intrinsic value themselves, and never as mere objects of instrumental value.

[12] A contemporary philosopher by the name of Thomas Mappes, arguably a "Neo-Kantian" himself, has a nice clarification and expansion of Kant's basic idea. According to Mappes, our interactions with other human beings are morally permissible as long as they involve voluntary, informed consent. The "voluntary" part is respect for one another's autonomy, allowing people to choose for themselves rather than be coerced, which could involve the straightforward use of physical force or the use of threats of some kind. The "informed" part is respect

for one another's rationality, allowing people to think for themselves rather than be deceived. Deception can involve straightforward lies, of course, but according to Mappes (expanding on Kant's idea), there are a variety of other less obvious forms of deception, such as the use of half-truths, misleading truths, or even just the omission of information that would be relevant to the other person's decision, information that they would clearly want to know before deciding how to behave, and information to which they are *prima facia* entitled (as opposed to private information to which they have no right). As long as we allow one another to think and to choose fully for ourselves, without coercion or deception, then we have given each other the respect we deserve as rational, autonomous beings (170-183).

[13] Of course, the basic idea of respecting our fellow humans, and thinking about their value independent of our personal ends, is not limited to Kantianism, old or new. Similar ideas also find their way into a variety of other thinkers' moral theories, including John Locke's social contract theory. Like his philosophical precursor Thomas Hobbes, Locke has us imagine a pre-societal situation that they both call the state of nature. Unlike Hobbes, Locke does not think it would be a state of war of one against all. The primary reason for this difference is Locke's view of human nature. Like Hobbes, Locke does believe that humans as self-interested; however, Locke places far more emphasis on the role of reason in human behavior, and a take on reason that is more than mere prudential reasoning. For Locke, reason also allows us to recognize and respect the natural rights of other human beings. The reasoning might go as follows: "I am self-interested; I take an interest in my own well-being. I must attain certain goods, minimally those such as food, clothing, and shelter, in order to sustain myself. However, as a rational being, I also recognize that there are other people out there, not just me. If I believe that I have a natural right to pursue my self-interest, I must also recognize that others have the same right. Insofar as that is true, I will attempt to pursue those needs without getting in the way of others doing the same." This is all very Kantian in some ways: I see the rest of the world as mere means to my end of self-interest, with the exception of other humans, whom I see as having an independent status deserving of a special kind of treatment, a respect for their ends, a respect for them

as ends in themselves, rather than mere means to my ends (see Locke 8-13, 14-16, 65-67).

[14] There are some fairly obvious implications from all of this to Inara. She is keeping her terminal condition a secret from everyone. This is information that could have an effect on how others decide to interact with her. In that respect, there is arguably something *prima facia* wrong with her behavior, something disrespectful to her fellow human beings. However, it is obviously not quite as simple as that. Whether or not she is doing something unethical depends largely on the context and quality of the particular relationships in which she finds herself. With that in mind, let us examine a few of these.

[15] First, we should consider Inara's clients. Is Inara treating them as mere means to an end, without respecting them as ends in themselves? In this case, most likely not. For the most part, the client-Companion relationship does not seem to be one of great depth and substance. Though she does have some repeat clients, in general the clients are paying for an experience, not a long-term, intimate bond. Inara's medical condition does not appear to prevent her from carrying out her services to her clients, at least not at the time of the events portrayed in the series and the movie—she is in perfect health from all appearances, at least that a client would see. (In fact, she undergoes a required physical in "Ariel," 1.9.) And as noted above, since some clients, such as Atherton, are paying for façade more than substance, it would seem that they would not want to know, much less are they entitled. It might be another thing completely if it were a contagious disease that could affect the client's health, but since it is not, they are not entitled to that information. So we must conclude that since her condition does not interfere with her duties, nor does it pose a threat to her clients' well-being, it is not any of her clients' business. Inara is withholding information, to be sure, but it is not information to which her clients are entitled in the first place, so there is no violation of voluntary informed consent, nor any disrespect to her clients' rationality or autonomy.

[16] Next, what about her fellow crew members on board Serenity? Here we have a mixed case. Her relationships with the crew vary a great deal from person to person. Some are no more than co-workers or work-acquaintances. This is certainly true of her relationship with Jayne

(whom she does not even appear to like very much), and possibly even with Simon, River, and Book, with whom she does not interact a great deal. Others may be closer, but still in the realm of casual friends or "work-friends." This seems to characterize her relationship with Zoe and Wash: they seem to like one another, but do not appear very close. For this, we might say that her condition is too personal and private to require that it be shared with those to whom she simply is not very close; our co-workers and casual friends are not entitled to such information. If her condition becomes such that it might affect or even endanger them, that would be another thing entirely, but it does not seem to have come to that at any point that we see in the series or movie.

[17] Finally, what about those members of the crew with whom she does have closer relationships? There are two candidates here: Kaylee and Mal. From very early on, it is obvious that her relationship with Kaylee is much closer than that with the others, certainly a much closer friendship, and perhaps something even more in the vein of a big sister-little sister relationship. Kaylee is one of the few people that Inara invites into her shuttle, a place which she takes very seriously as a symbol of her independence and privacy. Kaylee clearly cares about Inara a great deal, much as a family member would. Also, Inara's relationship with Mal, though much more complicated, is also clearly more intimate than that with the other crew members. The romantic tension between the two of them is obvious from the get-go, and as previously mentioned, *Serenity* ends with the clear implication that the romance may finally be about to get off the ground. In both the cases of Kaylee and Mal, there is an emotional intimacy that far exceeds that with any other crew member, and these cases make the ethics of her withholding her condition much less pure. If anyone is entitled to know about our serious health issues, it would be close friends, family, and lovers. Such people make a serious investment in their relationships with us, and take on a considerable amount of emotional risk in doing so. In that regard, one might argue that they are entitled to know what they are getting into, and to withhold such information is disrespectful. Admittedly, things are less than clear when dealing with medical issues. In many legal contexts (including that of the U.S.), adults have the right to decide who has access to information about their medical conditions

and histories. However, legal issues are conceptually distinct from ethical issues, and I contend that from a Kantian point of view at least, there is something less than respectful about withholding such information, even if one is legally entitled to do so.

Concluding Reflections

[18] Inara is without a doubt a fascinating character. She is introduced precisely to provide a stark contrast to so many other members of the crew. She is the one "respectable" person aboard *Serenity*, serving as their informal "ambassador," as Mal puts it ("Serenity" 1.1); and despite the fact that he means it as an ironic jab at her profession, it is actually the case that her presence aboard the ship opens doors for the crew that would otherwise be closed. However, as the show progresses through its short-lived run, she begins to present not only a stark contrast with others, but also a kind of contradiction within herself, as we begin to see more and her conflicted feelings about her profession, her loyalties, and her relationships. With the benefit of hindsight, those contradictions and conflicts become even starker in light of her terminal condition. All the more the shame, once again, that we were not able to see her character play out over multiple seasons.

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[1] This is a summary of Sartre's extensive metaphysics as explained in *Being and Nothingness*, especially the introduction (3-32) and part 1, chapter 1 (33-85). For a more general discussion of Whedon and existentialism, see Richardson and Rabb's *The Existential Joss Whedon*.