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Moral Complexity in the Buffyverse



[1] At some point in anyone's ethical development, they must attempt to chart a path between the naïve acceptance of existing ethical dogmas and the black hole of rejecting the possibility of ethics altogether. Some people never manage to strike a balance. One sort falls back into the blind acceptance of the "self-evident" truths of their culture or revealed religion. I will call these people *ethical dogmatists*. Another sort of person gives up on ethics altogether, embracing some sort of skepticism or relativism. Following Harman (1977) I will call these people *ethical nihilists*. Between these two lies the realm of moral complexity. Many academic commentators have noticed that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its spin-off *Angel* are deeply concerned with moral issues but also are loathe to give simple moral answers. This concern is even closer to the surface in Whedon's subsequent projects *Firefly* and *Serenity*. [\[1\]](#) Whedon's projects share an affinity with Alan Moore, who frequently imposes morally complex situations on the more simplistic genre of the superhero comic (see, e.g., the classic Moore and Gibbons 1985).

[2] Critics have responded to the treatment of moral complexity in *Buffy* in the same ways that people have responded to moral complexity in real life. Some, seeing how the show undermines the simplistic morality of the genres it draws on, view *Buffy* as a giddy rejection of all moral systems. Others, especially academic philosophers, have taken the language of good and evil in the series at face value, and attempted to read their preferred philosophical theory of ethics into the show on that basis. More recent critics, looking at the show on its own terms, have reached the conclusion that *Buffy* is in some way incoherent. This essay sides with the third camp. In what follows I will first clarify the ideas of moral skepticism and moral dogmatism and what it means for a television show to attempt to chart a path between them. In sections two and three I will argue against the first two camps that *Buffy* really does enter into the middle ground, and offer some explanations for why authors give fully dogmatist or fully nihilist readings of *Buffy*. In the final section I will argue, in agreement with the third camp, that the moral elements of *Buffy* are at odds with each other, and the creators of the show do not intend to resolve them. What the writers have given us is a fictional analogue to a morally complex real world, a world that demands a moral response but resists being captured in a single theory of right and wrong.

1. What Is Moral Complexity, and How Does a TV Show Address It?

[3] It is easy enough to get an intuitive picture of the dogmatist and the nihilist, since we all have met people who are excessively set in their views or excessively relativist, skeptical, or otherwise doubtful. Those of us who teach ethics for a living confront every semester both closed-minded fundamentalism and a phenomenon known as "student relativism." The student relativist uses stock phrases like "it's all relative" or "it's just a

matter of opinion" to avoid thinking seriously about ethical issues. The better ethics textbooks, particularly those of a practical bent (e.g., Curzer 1999; Liszka 2002; Bonevac 2002), treat both relativism and dogmatism as obstacles to ethical thinking, often to be set aside in the introduction before the real text begins.

[4] Although it is easy enough to identify dogmatists and nihilists, the range of viewpoints is quite complex. The views I am labeling dogmatism and nihilism differ from each other along four independent axes. The axis that has defined the issue for philosophers is *justification*. The dogmatist takes ethics to rest on a single feature of the world or a small number of features, such as the existence of God, or humanity's inevitable selfishness combined with a need for limited cooperation for survival. The nihilist denies the existence of this foundation, and infers from this that ethical claims are false, meaningless, or only capable of truth or meaning relative to some culture or individual worldview. The other three axes represent debates that have often been confused with the debate over ethical justification. They are really quite distinct, though, to the extent that opposing poles probably should not be called "dogmatism" and "nihilism." One such axis is *revisability*. The dogmatist believes that the foundations of ethics are self-evident, and therefore that beliefs about those foundations should never be revised in the face of further evidence or argument. Let's call this attitude *revelationism*. The opposing nihilist attitude is the inability to take any ethical stand for fear of being wrong, which we may call *moral cowardice*. The healthy mean would then be *fallibilism*. A third axis is *universality*: the dogmatist pole holds to exceptionless rules, a middle ground might hold that rules only hold for the most part, and the opposing pole holds that every case exists in splendid isolation. Here the opposition is really between *universalism* and *particularism*. A final axis, *abstraction*, ranges between *impersonalists* who regard ethics as stemming from abstract reason and *personalists* who base it on concrete relationships. Both particularism and personalism, far from being forms of black nihilism, are hallmarks of care ethics, which, like *Buffy*, comes with important feminist credentials.

[5] There are many dimensions to the morality of a work of art, any of which might be identified as the "moral" of the artwork. You can look at the morality of the acts depicted, the moral viewpoint of the characters, or the moral viewpoint the author or authors of the work intended to express. You can talk about the moral importance of the impact of the work, either on the minds of the audience or on the world as a whole. You can reconstruct what moral system is true in the universe depicted by the artwork, which is how Stevenson prefers to approach the issue (Stevenson 2004). Finally, you can talk about the moral meaning or meanings of an artwork as a communicative act, which might be quite different from the meaning the author or authors intended to convey. This last sense of the moral content of an artwork is probably constructed in some way out of all of the earlier senses. The second to the last dimension, about the moral ontology of the fictional world, is similar to other questions about the metaphysics of the Buffyverse, such as the personal identity question argued by *Buffy* scholars, "Is the vampire the same person as the human?" (see, e.g., McLaren 2005). How to understand the moral nature of the Buffyverse is a natural question to ask if we think morality is important and a TV show can have interesting moral content. In what follows I will investigate the moral content of *Buffy* in two senses, the moral ideas the authors of the show intend to express and the moral system that is true in the world of the show. I will leave the exceedingly complex issue of the moral meaning of the show for another day.

[6] Discussing the question of the intention of the authors of *Buffy* raises the difficult issue of who, if anyone, counts as the *auteur* of *Buffy*. Although the standard answer here is that Whedon is the author, I prefer to honor the collaborative nature of television by focusing on the collective author of *Buffy*, which includes, but is not limited to Whedon, the writers, the designers, and the cast. I will call this collective author Mutant Enemy (ME), although this Mutant Enemy is probably distinct from Mutant Enemy as a legal entity. I use a corporate author for *Buffy* in an effort to follow through on the first two items in Sue Turnbull's "plan" for an aesthetic of television (Turnbull 2004). Turnbull correctly claims that an aesthetic of television must be the "industry and

production context," which means knowing about the constraints brought on it by networks, economics, and format (§39). Further, in the spirit of Turnbull (2004) and Pateman (2006) I would claim that the constraints shouldn't be viewed as purely negative factors, so that aesthetic failings are chalked up to clueless network executives and successes credited to the genius show creator. Turnbull also argues that an aesthetic of TV must pay attention to auteurs, which includes not just show creators like Whedon, but the other writers and directors as well. Again, I agree and want to take this further, to include the whole creative team: the designers who actually create the visual elements of this visual medium, the actors who are crucial for developing character, etc. On top of that, it is not enough to consider all of these authors individually because the interaction between them is creative in itself. The easiest way to take all this into account is to imagine a single corporate author, Mutant Enemy, working in a specific context of network television production. This move obviously poses lots of problems that I cannot resolve here. I will only note that people successfully talk about collective agency and collective intention all the time. Judges and lawyers, for instance, are often asked to interpret the intent of Congress in passing a law or of the Founders in writing the constitution.

[7] The final tool we need to discuss the moral perspective of a work of art is a notion of genre. *Buffy* is a multigenre piece, drawing on the conventions not just of vampire lore, but of television comedy and superhero comics. Further complicating the picture is that genre itself works on many levels, with overlapping subgenres and supergenres. Forster (2003) helpfully divides vampire stories into the traditional story, governed by Christian morality with the vampire as an evil tempter, and the alternative story, where the vampire is "a hero (sometimes tragic, sometimes not) who overcomes conventional morality" (p. 7). Think of the difference between F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* and Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*. Liszka (2002) identifies important supercategories of genres based on the moral worldview they express. Three important categories for him are "melodramatic," "ironic," and "thalian." Melodramas, in this context, are stories with easily identifiable heroes and villains who always get what they deserve in the end. Superhero stories and traditional vampire tales are melodramas. The melodramatic moral vision is dogmatic in every respect. Moral truths are built into the very structure of the world—think about the Force in *Star Wars* with its dark and light sides. This means that morality is self-evidently justified, can be known with revelatory clarity, applies to everyone, and is abstracted from personal relationships. Ironies, on the other hand, are the most nihilist of stories. Liszka associates ironies with the bleak absurdism of *The Trial* or *Waiting for Godot* and with tales of moral collapse like *1984* and Eastwood's *Unforgiven*. In the ironic vision, melodramatic tales are sabotaged by heroes who are morally corrupt, deluded, or simply unable to defeat the forces lined up against them. Morality fails because no action (or every action) can be justified morally because morality is forever unknown or because the cold fabric of the universe won't let morality be applied evenly or exist apart from little communities of people making it up for themselves. There are a universe of story kinds between the melodramatic and the ironic, but I need only mention one here. In the thalian vision, evil comes fundamentally from being misguided, and tension is resolved when the villain, the other, is assimilated into a now enriched community. Liszka identifies Shakespearean comedies like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much Ado about Nothing* as well as Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* as sharing this vision.

[8] The implicit morality of a genre is a determining factor in the moral meaning or meanings of an artwork as a communicative act. It is one of the factors that separates the meaning the authors intended from the meaning of the act itself. The divisions in kinds of story being considered here are very general, subsuming and sometimes cutting across the differences between say, Westerns and science fiction. Wright (2004) attempts to argue that *Firefly* failed because it failed to negotiate the different ideas of masculinity in Westerns and science fiction. The divisions considered here operate at a much higher level. Science fiction can be as melodramatic as *Star Wars*, ironic as *Brazil*, or thalian as *Star Trek*.

[9] My claim is that ME is trying to say something about issues of justification,

revisability, universality, and abstraction in morality—although not in such neatly labeled categories. My further claim is that ME does not find a clear middle ground on any of these dimensions. The film critic Robin Wood introduced the phrase “incoherent text” to describe 1970s movies where the text and subtext are at odds (Wood 2003). Whedon paid homage to Wood by naming a prominent Season Seven character after him. In fact, Whedon discussed the film critic Robin Wood before introducing the character in a post to the official Buffy discussion board The Bronze on May 22, 2002.

Now there’s also people preaching one thing while glorifying another, there’s what Robin Wood calls the “Incoherent Text” of so many seventies movies, where peace and understanding may be the underlying desire, but horror and violence is the structure—or the fun. My favorite example of the incoherent text is *DIE HARD*, where Bruce Willis must learn to be more supportive of his wife—while systematically stripping away everything (her boss, her workplace, her watch, her NAME) that she has. The decency running alongside the misogyny there is evident. I guess the point is, the best texts are incoherent. They EMBODY the struggle you describe. Horror is reactionary. I’m liberal. But we get along. And *DIE HARD* is a great damn flick. [\[2\]](#)

In the remainder of the essay I will argue that Stevenson (2004) and Pateman (2006) are right to label *Buffy* an “incoherent text” (or more properly speaking, an incoherent artwork). The next section will look at readings I classify as “dogmatist.” Next, I will look at the nihilist readings. The final section will consider *Buffy* as an incoherent artwork.

2. Dogmatist Interpretations of *Buffy*

[10] The easiest way to misread *Buffy* is to take its melodramatic inheritance at face value. The Buffyverse could be like the *Star Wars* universe, with simple ideas of good and evil built in, and ME could have a moral outlook like George Lucas’s. Interpreting the details of ME’s worldview would then simply be a matter of determining what moral system is encoded in their world. This approach is popular among the contributors to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy* (South 2003). In this section, I will consider readings from Scott Stroud (2003), Neal King (2003), Greg Forster (2003), and Karl Schudt (2003). A caveat is in order: the commentators are not specific about what they mean by the moral perspective of *Buffy*. For this section I will focus on the perspective ME intends to convey, with some asides about the moral perspective of the characters, and the moral statements that are true in the universe of the show.

[11] Perhaps the most dogmatic of dogmatic readings is Scott Stroud’s Kantian analysis of *Buffy* (Stroud 2003). Stroud essentially shows how the actions of one character, Buffy Summers, could be justified using Immanuel Kant’s style of moral reasoning. Kant’s rationalist theory of ethics is based on the belief that the good person does the right thing simply for the sake of doing the right thing. From this assumption, Kant derives a rule he calls the “categorical imperative,” which basically poses a universalization test on all actions. Kant wants you to ask, “What would happen if everyone did this?” The idea is that one cannot really be doing the right thing for the sake of the right thing unless you are doing something that everyone can do. Evil then boils down to making an exception for yourself: “This is wrong when others do it, but ok for me.” Although Kant thought of himself as making more modest claims for ethics than his predecessors, his ethics are dogmatist in every sense of the term I have outlined. Ethical rules can be justified rationally, known with certainty, apply universally, and are disconnected from human relationships.

[12] Stroud does a good job of showing that Buffy Summers’s actions accord with the categorical imperative and that the demons she fights are evil in Kant’s sense. (It would be a bad sign for Kant if even superheroes do not come out as good and demons come off as bad on his theory.) However, even if Buffy’s actions are justified by the

categorical imperative, ME repeatedly tells the audience that they do not value Kantian-style moral reasoning. Kant's hyperrational moral does not sit well with the show's emphasis on compassion and relationships as the foundation of morality. A good example of this is the Initiative story arc ("The Initiative," 4007 through "Primeval," 4021). The Initiative is the embodiment of rationalism in the Buffyverse: a covert, government run, demon-fighting project. A centerpiece of the Initiative story arc is Riley's realization that his organization's moral code—humans good, demons bad—is too simplistic for the real world. The Initiative would label Oz a demon ("Hostile Sub-terrestrial" in their jargon) because he is a werewolf, and once he is so classified, he can be killed or experimented on with impunity. When Riley sees this is wrong, he seems to move to an ethic that is less dogmatic on three axes: it is less universalizing because he sees exceptions; it is more personal because the exception is made partially on the basis of a personal relationship; and it is of course more subject to revision.

[13] Of course, any Kantian worth her salt will tell you that Riley's realization simply trades an unsophisticated vision of the categorical imperative for a sophisticated one. The universal rule he had been working with before "kill all demons" needs to be replaced by a more complicated one, maybe "kill all demons that don't have a human side and a potential for redemption." But this does not change the fact that all the symbols in the story point away from any hyperrationalistic universalizing ethics. Not only is Riley embracing ideas more obviously in line with fallibilism, particularism, and personalism, he is rejecting an institution laden with symbols of rationality—including scientific leadership, jargon, and ultimately their own version of Frankenstein's monster. Meanwhile, the Scoobies carry all kinds of symbols of care, including the fact that they are trying to save their friend, and that they ultimately triumph by merging their powers. Riley's moral development acts as a cautionary tale against all hyperrationalist systems of ethics, including Kantianism. It is hardly an argument against them, but it lets us know that Mutant Enemy wants us to value relationships over reason.

[14] Similar objections apply to Neal King's deliberately provocative essay "Brownskirts: Fascism, Christianity, and the Eternal Demon" (King 2003). As I stated earlier, many of the genres *Buffy* plays with, including superhero stories and classic vampire tales, carry with them a melodramatic moral vision. Essentially, King takes the melodramatic inheritance at face value, but then, recognizing the dangers of the melodramatic moral vision, condemns *Buffy* for its dogmatism. More specifically, King claims that the moral perspective of the Buffyverse is fascist: it calls for a renewal of a corrupt society through organized violence directed against a racial other. King's point is easy to see. Anyone with experience in science fiction, fantasy, or horror can see that the space aliens, dwarves, and other beasties often code for human races. (In *Star Wars: Episode 1* this trope was particularly appalling.) Given this identification, what is the slayer line but a merciless ongoing pogrom? The fact that many demons occupy positions of social power (e.g., the Mayor) is merely evidence of the need for more bloody purges of effete society. The melodramatic vision of many horror stories becomes more explicit if the tale gets drawn out. Horror franchises often degenerate into action franchises—witness the *Alien* movies. As the monsters become better known, they evolve into an opposing army that the heroes must fight. If the monsters also code for races, we have a race war.

[15] Clearly, though, ME is not sending a fascist message. The stench of race war is present in the horror and action movie tradition they have placed themselves in. Fascists love a good melodrama. But the plots ME introduce consistently undermine the core element of the fascist reading of *Buffy*, the identification of demons with a racial other. We've already seen this at work in the initiative arc: Riley recognizes that not all monsters are bad. This is an example of a general move Mary Alice Money labels "the undemonization of supporting characters" (Money 2002). In the essay, Money refers to the tendency of both demon and human minor characters to become more sympathetic as the show progresses. In itself this is not much. Typically in American television, if a character stays on screen long enough, something will be done to flesh her out. Either she must undergo a transformation, or something must be revealed about the way she already is. If

the characters started out as one-dimensional bad guys, they will often become more human. This creeping nicification happened again and again during the 11 year run of *M*A*S*H*. (There are exceptions, of course: *ER* depicted Dr. Robert Romano as a jerk to the end.) What is remarkable about the development of *Buffy* is that while the demon characters were humanized, the human characters were demonized. Spike achieves redemption, Clem is revealed to be nothing but a puppy dog, but Warren becomes viler each time we see him. His face becomes so associated with repugnant behavior that having his skin flayed off is an improvement. All of this firmly undermines the idea that ME wishes to portray demons as a racial other. We will return to this topic in the final section on *Buffy* as an incoherent artwork, when we look at whether a fascist morality is true in the Buffyverse.

[16] No one seems to have mentioned this to some of the characters on *Buffy*, though. Xander's persistent feelings of revulsion toward vampires like Spike who have been humanized for the audience will remind any sensitive viewer of racism. The racist overtones are reinforced by their association with sexual jealousy. When he discovers that Anya has slept with Spike, he explodes "You let that evil, soulless thing touch you. You wanted me to feel something? Congratulations, it worked. I look at you—and I feel sick—'cause you had sex with that" ("Entropy," 6018). Xander's reaction is clearly reminiscent of racist fears that "those people" are out to get "our women" and revulsion at miscegenation. Buffy Summers herself is also more than a little fascist. She lives by a rule only a touch more sophisticated than the Initiative's: demons are evil and can be killed on sight; humans might be evil, but always deserve due process of law. Her reactions to Faith's murder of a human ("Bad Girls," 3014), the times she has believed herself responsible for a human death ("Ted," 2011 and "Dead Things," 6013), and her insistence that Warren and his henchmen can't simply be killed ("Villains," 6020 through "Grave," 6022) show how firmly this ethic is embedded in her mind. By Season Seven, when we see her continuously offering "rousing" speeches to her slayer army, King's image of the Slayer-as-II-Duce seems quite apt. The fact that her lovers are almost all vampires doesn't expand her moral outlook. It only makes her a hypocrite in the eyes of her restless troops and is actually a part of the fascist personality type. The world is full of racists who are sexually fixated on the other they despise. However, by the end of Season Seven, Buffy is pulled out of her descent into fascism by the revolt of the potentials against her authority and her ultimate decision to literally share her power with all the potentials.

[17] These hard dogmatist readings of *Buffy* simply do not work out, but there are also softer dogmatist readings. Two commenters, Greg Forster (2003) and Karl Schudt (2003), focusing on the Faith story arc, have independently identified a eudaemonist ethic in *Buffy* and interpreted this eudaemonism as an attempt to find a middle ground between dogmatism and nihilism. Eudaemonism is the belief that one should be moral because this is the only way to fulfill human nature and be happy and flourish. The name comes from the Greek word eudaemon, which can mean "happiness," "success," or "flourishing." The two most important Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, both advocated forms of eudaemonism. Foster and Schudt see eudaemonism at work in the Faith arc, especially in the body switching episode "Who Are You" (4016), where Faith comes to see that her life as a selfish pleasure seeker is simply not as satisfying as Buffy's life of duty and love. Forster further sees this eudaemonism as a middle ground between what I have been calling dogmatism and nihilism, which he associates with the classic Christian version of the vampire tale and the alternative, Nietzschean version, respectively. He further argues that this eudaemonism is specifically Platonic, because it shows that the unjust person is driven by lust and better off being punished. Thus in the *Angel* episode "Sanctuary" (1019) Faith is shown finding peace by voluntarily going to jail.

[18] Forster and Schudt are clearly right about the eudaemonistic content of the Faith arc and about the way the theme of redemption blocks Nietzschean, nihilistic readings of *Buffy*. More specifically, the repeated redemptions in the show—first Angel, then Faith, and then Spike—clearly show us that ME does not intend to communicate a nihilist message. Otherwise why hit the same theme so many times? Redemptions also

indicate that there must be real good and evil in the Buffyverse. Otherwise, it is hard to make sense of the narrative. But not all of the redemption narratives fit the eudaemonist, let alone the Platonist, model. The redemption of Spike has both Platonic and Aristotelian elements. The chip in Spike's brain brings him to virtue the Aristotelian way, by forcing new habits upon him. [3] Two years pass between the installing of the chip in "The Initiative" (4007) and his ensoulment in "Grave" (6022), during which time he must learn to feed on animals and live with humans. Spike's relationship with Buffy redeems him the Platonic way, by having his love of a person channeled into love of the Good. [4]

[19] Angel's story, more importantly, is distinctly antieudaemonistic. He is seeking atonement for the horrible things he did as a vampire without a soul. (Although exactly why he has to, since the vampire is different from the person, is never clear. See Krause 2004 and McClaren 2005.) It is clear, certainly by the time he gets his own show, that he has redeemed himself. He has, after all, been selected by the Powers That Be to be a Champion in the battle between good and evil. But Angel can't be happy. It's part of the curse: if he experiences a moment of real happiness he loses his soul again. The philosophical model for Angel's story is not Plato or Aristotle, but Camus. Whedon, quite famously, has been guided by an existentialist philosophy since he first encountered Sartre's *Nausea* (1938/1959) when he was sixteen (Whedon 2003). One of the most famous essays in the existential tradition is Albert Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus." There Camus considers the fate of the Greek king Sisyphus, condemned to forever roll a rock up a hill only to see it roll back down again as a metaphor for human existence. Camus describes how Sisyphus can find meaning in his existence, even though he never accomplishes anything. Angel is in a similar position as a Champion of good, because *Mutant Enemy* has informed us again and again that good and evil are always in balance in the Buffyverse. In an episode with the neon sign of a name "Epiphany" (2016), Angel forges a very Sisyphean peace with his situation: "There's no grand plan. There's no big win... I wanna help because I don't think people should suffer, as they do. Because if there isn't any bigger meaning, then the smallest act of kindness is the greatest thing in the world." The episode was written by Tim Minear, indicating that the existentialist themes of the show are not just Whedon's personal concern but are part of the collective intention of *Mutant Enemy*. Moreover, this sort of existential peace with the universe is very different than Greek visions of a life of eudaemonia. This is not a picture of flourishing, growth, and success, but an understanding of how to soldier on when growth and success are not forthcoming. Greg Sakal (2003) describes redemption in *Buffy* as a gradual revelation of life's purpose. What is this purpose? "In the Buffyverse, it is clearly not personal happiness since none of the main characters manage to achieve more than a few fleeting snatches of this. Rather it is the process of growing, or becoming that *BtVS* puts in our face" (p. 253). We will look more at these existential themes in the next section.

3. Nihilist Interpretations of *Buffy*

[20] The world of *Buffy* is too ambiguous and slippery for a pure, melodramatic dogmatist ethic, or even a softer eudaemonist ethic, to hold in it. How far away from clear moral meaning can we go? The most extreme claim is that *Buffy* simply exists to mock and overturn traditional dualisms of good and evil, along with the gender norms and other forms of oppression that come with it. This seems to be the view of Pender (2002). In an attempt to explain how Buffy Summers can be both girly and empowered, Pender asserts that the show "delights in deliberately and self-consciously baffling the binary" including the alleged opposition between the trappings of traditional femininity and empowerment. This allows Pender to proceed by "questioning the logic of the transgression/containment model" in feminism. Pender concludes that *Buffy* is an instance of "feminist camp" and a "site of intense cultural negotiation in which competing definitions of the central terms of the debate—revolution/apocalypse, feminist/misogynist, transgression and containment—can be tested and refined."

[21] There is a clear element of truth to what Pender says. *Buffy* isn't just a horror

series. It is a horror-comedy. Just as the classic vampire mythology comes with an implicit melodramatic vision, comic genres also come with moral visions. In section 1, I described two moral visions from Liszka that are associated with comedy, the thalian vision and the ironic vision. Pender's feminist camp shares much in common with Liszka's ironic vision. In the ironic world, morality simply fails. Pender is clearly right to identify an ironic element in *Buffy*, although this form of comedy may be darker than she realizes. Liszka associates the ironic vision with bleak absurdist stories like *The Trial* or *Waiting for Godot*. The ironic vision is as nihilistic as the melodramatic vision is dogmatic, but the dimension of moral cowardice is often quite prominent. The ironist never really takes a moral stand, because she believes that such stands are impossible, or doomed to defeat.

[22] Fortunately, there is more to *Buffy* than the campy addition of ironic asides on melodramatic vampires. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is not like *Psycho Beach Party* (King 2000), even though both mix elements of horror with teenage ditziness and feature Nicholas Brendan. The important thing to see here is the profound moral optimism of the show. Many of the elements we looked at in the last section point to this, but the constant theme of redemption is most important of all. As I said earlier, it is hard to make sense of a world of redemptive narratives unless you assume that some kind of morality holds in that world. And it is certainly hard to understand ME's motivations for presenting three separate story arcs based on redemption if they were merely being ironists. Whedon himself disowns camp, even feminist camp. He told the *New York Times*, "I hate it when people talk about *Buffy* as being campy....I hate camp. I don't enjoy dumb TV. I believe Aaron Spelling has single-handedly lowered SAT scores" (Nussbaum 2002). The redemptive story lines come from a different comedic tradition than ironies. They are thalian, based in the faith that evil is a form of ignorance or confusion—a comic misunderstanding—that can be resolved in a way that unites everyone.

[23] There are other viewpoints, besides ironic nihilism, that are close to the nihilistic end of the spectrum. I mentioned earlier that the polar opposites of dogmatism on the axes of abstraction and universality, particularism and personalism, are not thought of as nihilistic, but are hallmarks of care ethics, which comes with strong feminist credentials. Care ethics was popularized by Carol Gilligan (1982) as an empirical model of women's ways of thinking about moral issues. It also has roots in the existentialist feminist ethic Simone de Beauvoir outlines in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947/1949). Gilligan and others were dismayed at psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's (1969) assertion that women and girls did not develop morally to the extent that men and boys do. Care ethics was meant as a way to show that female ethical development was not a defective version of male development, but actually a separate but equally sophisticated path. This empirical model was later taken up by philosophers such as Nel Noddings (1984) as a normative model for how people *should* think ethically. As I said before, care ethics does not base itself in universal rules applied impartially. Its basis, instead, is in emotion, particularly the caring emotions found in real relationships. In addition to being extremely particularistic and personal, care ethics embraces a moderate fallibilism, in that it assumes that people will change their ethical stances as the particular situation around them changes, but it avoids moral cowardice by acknowledging the strong drive to moral action presented by the caring emotions. Thus we have a rejection of universal abstract morality that does not come with the kind of moral cowardice we see in the ironic vision. There is still reason to be moral, even if morality doesn't work the way the dogmatists think it does. Given *Buffy's* feminist and existential background, there is an obvious case to be made that the show takes up one of these perspectives.

[24] Miller (2003) makes the case for a care ethic in the Buffyverse. Miller rightly points out an element of care ethics in the way that Buffy Summers develops her sense of self through her relationships with the rest of the scooby gang. Miller is also correct to point out that Buffy's preferential treatment of vampires like Angel and Spike (or demons like Clem, for that matter) illustrates the kind of favoritism care ethics is often criticized for. It is also worth noting that ME seems to strongly approve of Buffy's use of care ethics, especially in their depiction of cooperation as the key to defeating the monster Adam at

the end of Season Four.

[25] Nevertheless, I think it would be a big mistake to claim that *Buffy* is a show dominated by care ethics. American television is overrun with tight-knit groups of people who find their identity through one another and are always there for each other in a pinch. Whether they are a lovable family overseen by a goofy, bumbling dad or a fun gang at the office overseen by a goofy, bumbling boss, the focus of most TV shows is a cohesive group. Even characters who are supposed to be reprehensible, like HBO's *Arliiss* or Fox's *Bundy* family, often redeem themselves through personal loyalty. Perhaps this is because producers feel that the way to hook an audience is for them to have a close relationship with the characters, and this is aided by giving the characters close relationships with each other. The elements of care ethics in *Buffy* don't represent a core message of the show; they are another part of its inheritance. Many of the highly Christian elements of the show are not there because ME wanted them per se, but because they are part and parcel of the vampire genre. Similarly the aspects of care ethics simply have to be there because the show is on TV. Also certain plot points undermine the idea that care ethics is important for the show, for instance, the legitimate resentment that the slayers in training had for *Buffy's* preferential treatment of some vampires in the final season.

4. *Buffy* as an Incoherent Artwork

[26] In section 1 I introduced Robin Wood's notion of an incoherent text. Whedon in his posting to *The Bronze* indicated that he was happy to see *Buffy* read as an incoherent artwork, and subsequent commentators have been happy to take him up on this. Stevenson calls *Buffy* "an incoherent text in the best tradition" (Stevenson 2004, p. 16). Pateman asserts that the "inconsistent moral universe is one of the show's greatest strengths" (Pateman 2006, p. 87). My goal in this last section is to support this conclusion. *Buffy* presents us not with a moral theory, but rather with a set of conflicting, instinctual responses to the moral systems it has inherited. It rejects both the moral absolutism of their vampiric heritage and the nihilism of their camp heritage. It endorses the thalian part of their comedic heritage and the care ethics of their feminist heritage. But this does not add up to a coherent message.

[27] To see how *Buffy* is an incoherent artwork, we should focus on what ethical statements might be true in the world of *Buffy*. I think at this point commentators basically agree that the metaphysics of the *Buffyverse* simply don't add up. We are told from the beginning, for instance, that the soul is the carrier of personal identity and moral status. You are your soul, not your body, and your soul makes you morally valuable. When a demon inhabits your body to create a vampire, that vampire is not you, and can be reduced to dust without qualm. Krause (2004) and McLaren (2005) point out that this is entirely inconsistent with the portrayal of Angel, who seems to feel rightfully guilty about the actions performed by the vampire Angelus, even though Angelus is a different entity altogether. Some of the problems with the ontology of souls in the *Buffy* universe can be rationalized by a clever viewer. For instance, in contrast to the Christian conception of the soul since the middle ages, the soul is not the only vehicle for memory or other mental traits. The vampire retains the memories and abilities of the victim. Sometimes the vampire also retains the personality of the victim (Harmony, Spike, Drusilla) but sometimes vampire is radically different (Angel). Krause does a good job explaining this variation by talking about the strengths of the personality of the demon and the body it inhabits, but in the end, even she admits that she can only rationalize so much: "For me, it's a frustrating flaw in Whedon's universe: to have explanations of 'how things work' clearly presented in some episodes but totally ignored in others" (p. 112).

[28] If the metaphysics of the *Buffyverse* don't add up, we shouldn't expect the ethics to fare much better. One simple question you can ask is whether the fascist ethic King attributes to *Buffy* is true in the universe of *Buffy*. Are the demons genuinely deserving of eradication? Whedon has played games like this other times. *Firefly* and *Serenity* seem to be set in a world where the myths of a classic western are true. In the

classic Western, Native Americans are savages, and the heroes like Jesse James or Josie Wales get some of their tragic nobility for having fought for honor on the losing side of the Civil War. In *Firefly* and *Serenity* the surrogates for Native Americans really are savages. The surrogate for the Confederacy really was justified in its cause. Does *Buffy* work the same way? Are the surrogates for other races really evil?

[29] The problem is sometimes they are and sometimes they aren't, depending on the needs of the plot. On one extreme, we have the typical vampire, who is there to provide an enemy for a short stretch of story, like an episode or a single fight scene. As Pateman puts it they "tend to lack motivation beyond being vampires, are often less quick witted, and usually end up getting staked" (p. 101). Their death is uncomplicated, and the dust is there to remind you that they are not human. Angel reinforces this idea by being unredeemably evil without a soul and noble with a soul. Spike complicates things more, because he has the traits that go with moral personhood from the beginning. He is capable of love and suffering. The two can even come together in the suffering of love gone wrong. Drusilla reminds us of this in Season Five, "Oh, we can, you know. We can love quite well. If not wisely" ("Crush," 5014). Spike's ability to love gives him at least a piece of moral agency, and his ability to suffer makes us sympathize with him. The audience is on his side long before he gains a soul. Still, ME reinforces the message that he is still evil by having him respond to his rejection by Buffy as a demon would, by trying to rape her. The undemonization of Spike is governed by the needs of the narrative. He was given more human traits to make him more interesting, and as the character became more popular his relationships deepened. Eventually, ME decided to redeem him, but needed a final test, and acquiring a soul was a logical choice. In doing this, though, they reinforce the possibility that a fascist ethic might be true in the Buffyverse.

[30] The real incoherence of the Buffyverse is demonstrated by the host of other supporting characters who are undemonized without reliance on a soul. The most prominent of these is Lorne. As Marguerite Krause points out, "the only reason to consider him a 'demon' at all is that he comes from what the humans call a 'demon dimension'" (p. 106). The demon dimension itself seems remarkably normal. Yes, they practice slavery and abhor music, but these things normally do not exclude anyone from the human community. Pylea is, at worst, a cross between the American antebellum South and a particularly uptight community of Baptists. To say Lorne is evil would be the ultimate racism: to condemn someone because he comes from a place that happens to be different than yours. A host of other undemonized characters block any attempt to view the Buffyverse as a place where a fascist ethic is true. Doyle and Groosalugg are good guys who are half demon. Whistler is a demon, but he works for the balance between good and evil, not for evil. According many popular views of ethics, a force for the natural order of the universe like Whistler is far more a good guy than Angel.

[31] The ethics of the Buffyverse are as incoherent as the metaphysics (which shouldn't be surprising, since they are linked). The typical conclusion to draw here is that this is an aesthetic flaw, perhaps a fatal one. The incoherence is a product of the constraints of serial television drama: ME had to make up the story as they went along, deal with sudden changes in agreements with networks and stars, and cater to the tastes of the irrationally coveted youth demographic. They had a hard time keeping track of whether Angel was Spike's sire or grandsire, let alone complicated moral issues. The failings of *Buffy* are the inevitable product of a benighted medium. But this is not the conclusion that Pateman and Stevenson draw. They both believe the incoherence is a strength of the work, and they are right. But how can that be?

[32] In the essay "The Incoherent Text" originally published in 1980 in the journal *Film*, Robin Wood looked at three movies which had recently generated controversy and confusion: *Taxi Driver*, *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, and *Cruising* (Wood 1980-1981, reprinted and revised in Wood 2003). In each case, Wood saw that the movie was torn over issues that trouble the American psyche in a deep way. *Cruising*, for instance, appears at first to be a piece of homophobic propaganda, which is how it was received by gay rights groups at the time. Al Pacino must descend into the world of gay S&M sex clubs (which we are

supposed to be horrified by) to find a serial killer (the most depraved of them all!). The film, however, undermines its own efforts to vilify gays by consistently portraying all the individual gay characters sympathetically, as ordinary people whose vices are no different than those of straights. The killer, moreover, is motivated by a desire to suppress his own sexuality: he kills the men who arouse him. The real villain is homophobia itself. Wood sees *Goodbar* as similarly undermining its own efforts to be misogynist. *Taxi Driver* is slightly different, in that its incoherence comes from a "clear-cut conflict of autuers." Scorsese is a "liberal humanist" interested in portraying Travis Bickle as a delusional psychopath, while screenwriter Paul Schrader is a "quasi-fascist" who sees Bickle as a tragic, lonely figure resisting a social corruption and urban decadence.

[33] The important thing to see here is that the incoherence of these movies is not random. We are not reading the arbitrary text generated by a spambot. We are watching the collision of profound forces in our culture. Another important feature of Wood's examples is that the movies he is attracted to are just as likely to get their incoherence from the circumstances of their production as any authorial intent. The clash between humanism and fascism in *Taxi Driver* is attributed to a clash of autuers. The homophobia of *Cruising* gets undermined in part by a standard genre trope. Director William Friedkin deploys a standard technique used in horror movies and detective shows, the symmetry between hunter and hunted. But this reinforces the impression that the supposedly depraved people in the world of gay S&M are sympathetic figures whose vices are no different than anyone else's.

[34] The moral incoherence of *Buffy* is compelling in ways much like the movies Wood looks at. The worldviews clashing in *Buffy*—nihilist camp, fascist superhero narratives, thalian redemption stories—are driving contemporary culture. And we should not be concerned that the clash between them is guided by forces out of the control of the authors. Wood's incoherent movies were also driven by outside forces. *Buffy* as an incoherent artwork offers us an interesting variation on Wood's incoherent texts. It specifically asks us to imagine an alternate world, which sets it apart from the ostensible realism (so often called "gritty realism") of *Taxi Driver* and company. Yet the fictional world we see presents in a fresh way the moral dilemmas of the real world. It is a world that cries out for moral judgments but resists making them coherently. Thus we know that there are some true moral statements, we have several good candidates for true moral statements, but we cannot always reconcile them and should be prepared to revise them in light of future experience.

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[1] Indeed, the symbolism of *Serenity* is genuinely heavy handed, with the Reavers representing moral nihilism, the Alliance representing dogmatism, and Mal occupying the zone of moral complexity.

[2] Archives of The Bronze discussion board have moved around several times since the show has been cancelled. As of January 19, 2009, you can find it at <http://www.bronzebeta.com/>. (Comments from Whedon are conveniently linked to on the front page, and then you can click on "May 22, 2002"). I have reproduced the quotation as is.

[3] See *Nicomachean Ethics* bk. 2 (e.g., in McKeon, ed. 1941).

[4] See *The Symposium* (e.g., in Cooper and Hutchinson, eds. 1997).