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Myth, Metaphor, Morality and Monsters: The Espenson Factor and Cognitive Science in Joss Whedon's Narrative Love Ethic



[1] In our book, *The Existential Joss Whedon*, we argue that the entire Whedonverse, from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* to the space westerns *Firefly* and *Serenity*, can be read as a sustained moral argument in which various ethical theories are found wanting and more acceptable alternatives are proposed and defended. In this paper we extend the argument of our book by sharing what we have learned since writing it. We reject as uncharitable any reading of the Whedonverse which claims, for example, "that the moral elements of *Buffy* are at odds with each other" (Loftis par 2). The sustained moral argument we find in *Buffy* cannot be a simple rational argument involving principles or premisses since, as we show in the book, reason itself is often questioned in many of the episodes. Instead, what is presented on screen is an indirect form of argument in which difficult hypothetical cases are imagined and various ways of dealing with them considered. Television drama is, of course, an excellent and entertaining way of presenting such arguments. The use of drama in exploring ethical decision making also permits consideration of exaggerated cases of moral ambiguity, such as vampires with souls and dateable werewolves. The examination of extreme cases is certainly a useful way of testing the viability of ethical theories and forces us to think long and carefully about exactly how and why we make the moral judgments and practical decisions that we do. Whedon's dramas turn out to be a form of narrative ethics which we characterize as a kind of existential love ethic, in effect, an ethics of care, a virtue ethics. We sometimes call it a post-Christian love ethic to acknowledge Whedon's atheistic stance and to draw attention to the fact that one need not be religious in order to live by an ethics of love and self-sacrifice (Rabb and Richardson 2007). We recognize that some critics are attracted to the Biblical resonances of Whedon's narratives. Dale Koontz, for example, in her book *Faith and Choice in the Works of Joss Whedon* illuminates Whedon's character Doyle by reference to the Biblical story of Jonah (91-93), aligns the Faith narrative with that of the Prodigal Son (137-145), and presents the perversion of Caleb as an inversion of the Saint Paul conversion experience (177). Her discussion of Dawn alone includes the following Biblical references: Acts 9: 1-21 (20), 1 Cor. 12: 22 (23), Eccles. 3: 1 (26), Matthew 4: 1-11(192 n13), Luke 4: 1-13 (192 n13), Acts 22: 6-21 (193 n15), and 26: 12-18 (193 n15), as well as Galatians 1: 12-16 (193 n15). We, however, take Whedon's atheism seriously. In fact, before encountering Whedon's narratives, we had rejected any kind of virtue love ethics on the grounds that it was too Christian, St. Thomas Aquinas having appropriated Aristotle's virtue ethics in support of the Catholic church. Though one of us was once a utilitarian, the other more of a Kantian, we can now say that our journey with Whedon, was, as Koontz might put it, our road to Damascus, our conversion experience, since we now fully accept a virtue love ethics as defended by Whedon's narratives.

[2] Admittedly, religion has always been a source of useful mythologies to supplement and even complement reason. As internationally recognized ethicist, Margaret Somerville, puts it in her recent book, *The Ethical Imagination*: "An important function of religion has been to keep us from adopting simplistic (simple but wrong) responses to complex realities...and one way it did so was by keeping open ways of knowing in addition to reason" (205), for example, "imagination as exhibited in myth" (205). She believes that

a problem for the contemporary ethicist is that while modern secular societies have largely abandoned religious language, at least in the sphere of public policy, "we have no robust, comprehensive, and widely shared vocabulary of the imagination—that is, no substitute language—to replace it" (73). Somerville suggests as one possible solution that "people who create and use popular culture (especially in the genre of science fiction) may be developing their own language of the imagination" (73). We would certainly agree, adding fantasy to the science fiction genre. Whether or not she agrees with the aesthetics or the morality of these imaginative creations of popular culture, Somerville quite rightly insists that such modern mythologies, which she calls the "secular sacred," "explore many universal and existential problems...quite effectively" (73). She is even forced to admit, with some surprise, that "They're creative. They're imaginative. They're even 'poetic'" and that "Popular culture, in fact, is the chief venue of secular myths" (73). On the basis of this, Somerville advises "From an ethics perspective, we need to pay close attention to what those myths are" (73) because "[o]ur primary focus on reason may have deprived us of the ability to deal with complexity" (205). Although Somerville does not completely abandon a rational theory of ethics grounded in fundamental moral rules, she has come to realize that something more is required to deal with the complexities of the many ethical issues we confront today.

[3] In our study of the mythology implicit in Joss Whedon's work, there is a sense in which we were following Somerville's advice to take the mythology of popular culture seriously, except for the facts that at the time we did not know we were following her advice and she had not yet offered it. Of the numerous academic articles and books focussing on Joss Whedon over the past decade, those which concentrate on ethics include Gregory Stevenson's *Televised Morality: The Case of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; Jana Riess' *What Would Buffy Do?: The Vampire Slayer as Spiritual Guide*; Rhonda Wilcox's *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; and most recently *Faith and Choice in the Works of Joss Whedon* by Dale Koontz as well as Emily Dial-Driver, et al., eds., *The Truth of Buffy: Essays on Fiction Illuminating Reality* (cf. Battis, Jowett, Pateman, South, Wilcox and Lavery, and Williamson). Most agree that the ethics found in the Whedonverse is a narrative ethics developed through metaphor. Recently, a number of commentators, including ourselves, have appealed to cognitive science in discussing the Whedonverse.

[4] Gregory Stevenson, in *Televised Morality* was one of the first, drawing on the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson to justify finding metaphor in a TV series. Citing Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, Stevenson argues that we are justified in seeing and analyzing the metaphorical structure of a television series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* because "metaphors belong as much to the province of thought as to that of words" (32). Metaphors "help us define reality and comprehend our world and ourselves" (33). Many of the conceptual metaphors our brains employ are derived from, have their source domain in, our own corporeal experience, linking concepts not by a narrow formal logic but by analogy, metaphor, and metonymy. For example, the Hellmouth under Sunnydale (not to mention the one under Cleveland) is mapped metaphorically from our physical mouths, as its primary source domain, as are the mouths of rivers, bottles, tunnels, and so forth. If this is at first a little difficult to swallow, remember that things are both disgorged from the Hellmouth and swallowed by it. And as Jane Espenson explains in *Serenity Found: More Unauthorized Essays on Whedon's Firefly Universe*, "Sci-fi tends to work through metaphor. Some Other-World is intended to represent our own world through some sort of mapping. The details of the correspondences are not stated explicitly; that work is left to the viewers....[I]t...fosters debate: points of view, passionately contested. In other words, metaphor leads to books of essays. Go metaphor!" (3).

[5] In our book, we criticize Stevenson for using only the early work of Lakoff and Johnson. Had he used their more recent book, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, he would have found an even more detailed and relevant examination of the relation between morality, metaphor, and thought. There Lakoff and Johnson distinguish between "basic experiential morality," such as "health is good," "everyone ought to be protected from physical harm," and more abstract universal moral concepts such as "justice," "rights," "nurturance," etc., all of which must be defined metaphorically. On the basis of this, they conclude that "there is no ethical system that is not metaphorical" (325). All moral metaphors, according to Lakoff and Johnson, "are inextricably tied to our embodied experience of well-being: health, strength, wealth, purity, control, nurturance, empathy, and so forth" (331). This is of crucial importance because it avoids the problem of ethical relativism. For Lakoff and Johnson, all moral "metaphors are

grounded in the nature of our bodies and social interactions, and they are thus anything but arbitrary and unconstrained" (290).

[6] Since working on *The Existential Joss Whedon*, we have discovered that this important discovery of cognitive science has also been used to counter the extreme relativism of postmodern literary theory. Drawing explicitly on Lakoff and Johnson, Mary Thomas Crane argues in *Shakespeare's Brain: Reading with Cognitive Theory*: "the Derridean 'there is nothing outside the text,'...clearly does not fit a cognitive theory. Indeed, from a cognitive perspective, meaning is anchored...by a three-way tether: brain, culture, discourse" (24). Crane's point is that "Cognitive subjects are not simply determined by the symbolic order in which they exist; instead, they shape (and are also shaped by) meanings that are determined by an interaction of the physical world, culture, and human cognitive systems" (12). It should be noted that we are not using cognitive literary theory to interpret *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Our paper is not titled "Whedon's Brain." We are simply drawing attention to the important and exciting discovery that the narrative morality based on metaphor found in Whedon's works is also an implication of cognitive science.

[7] According to Gregory Stevenson, "*Buffy's* perspective on good and evil is not a relativistic one in which the categories of good and evil are constantly redefined based on current circumstances, but neither is it an absolute one in which good and evil are always clearly defined" (73). Stevenson here recognizes Whedon's sophistication in seeing that moral discourse is really narrative rather than rational argument—complex, concrete storytelling rather than blindly applied abstract rules or principles. He also acknowledges that Whedon recognizes that the opposite of ethical relativism is not ethical absolutism; rather, if we may put it this way, the opposite of ethical relativism is non-relativism or un-relativism, on analogy with vampires, the undead.

[8] Agnes B. Curry in her *Slayage* article, "We Don't Say 'Indian': On the paradoxical construction of the Reavers," also appeals to cognitive science, which has discovered that our brains use prototypes or schemas to organize our world, and argues that this supports her argument that Whedon perpetuates negative stereotypes of Native Americans through his portrayal of the Reavers in *Firefly* and *Serenity*. Curry observes that "as widely-held cognitive and evaluative schemas linking people to characteristics because of their membership in specific social groups, social stereotypes are results of normal cognitive process....Stereotypes speed up mental processing, but prompt overgeneralization and foster inaccurate perception of individual cases" (par 12). Since this is done unconsciously, the prototypes are not immediately open to consciousness for criticism. Curry argues that it follows that stories which reinforce negative stereotypes (a form of prototype) just for entertainment, or indeed which simply deploy said stereotypes without overt or explicit critique, are morally culpable: "when stereotypical elements operate without foregrounding, at the edge of awareness, with no critical space opened up by emotional investment in the characters being stereotyped, they run a greater risk of merely triggering pre-existing schemas" (par 15). She argues Whedon does this in the case of the Reavers and stereotypical American Indians.

[9] We argue, on the contrary, that once again Whedon anticipates and outsmarts his critics. In *Buffy* and these space westerns Whedon and his writers seem to be using the findings of cognitive science to expose, examine, and explode negative stereotypes. The way Whedon challenges prototypes is in fact prototypical of the process: you confront one prototype with another, enlarging the overall perspective, or in the language suggested by philosopher Mark Johnson, becoming transperspectival, employing what has been described as the polycentric perspective, as opposed to the egocentric, ethnocentric, or anthropocentric perspectives (Rabb 1989, 1992; McPherson and Rabb 1993, 2001). As Johnson puts it "Here is a vision of a realistic human objectivity. It involves understanding, and being able to criticize, the way in which you and others have constructed their worlds, and it involves the imaginative capacity to conceive and carry out modest transformations of those constructed worlds. In other words, it involves a limited freedom to imagine other values and points of view and to change one's world in light of possibilities revealed by those alternative viewpoints" (241). As Willow observes at the end of Season 7, sensing the growing power of the newly activated Potential Slayers, "We changed the world" ("Chosen," 7022), proving, among other things, that "Scythe matters" ("End of Days," 7021). Johnson admits that it may seem strange to combine "imagination" and "objectivity," but he argues that it is just such an imaginative rationality

which makes human objectivity possible, by allowing us to empathetically take up the perspective of others in order to understand their experience "and how various possible actions might affect them" (242).

[10] Whedon's ethical position, and our own, could perhaps best be described as un-relativism. It is possible to reject both absolutism and relativism, provided you can offer some viable justification for moral choice. We contend moral choice can best be explained through narrative, and, as we will show, is usually grounded in metaphorical thought based on, proceeding from, prototypes rather than in absolute ethical principles or abstract universal moral rules.

[11] In Whedon's narratives, we find an emphasis on concrete particularized decision making, which we describe as a form of existential choice. We argue that "In all his works, Whedon is defending a radical existential ethics... Nothing can tell you what to do—not rules, not reason, not society, not church, not even divine authority. And nothing relieves you of the responsibility for your choices. Such is the nature of existential freedom" (*The Existential Joss* Whedon 4). Even a narrative ethics cannot tell you what to do, though it may well help you to understand why you no longer like that person you have become as a result of the choices that you have made. We all remember Faith beating up on herself ("Who are You?" 4016). Buffy, in the course of fighting monsters, metaphors for evil, comes to realize that moral choice cannot be made for you, that you, and only you, are fully responsible for every choice you make. As Buffy herself puts it, expressing a good deal of existential angst, "There's no mystical guidebook, no all-knowing council—human rules don't apply.... There's only me. I am the Law" ("Selfless," 7005).

[12] Buffy's claim here to be the law is very different from Faith's claim that, as Slayers, "we don't need the law. We *are* the law" ("Consequences," 3.15). They use almost the same words, but to diametrically opposed effect. Buffy is recognizing her crushing moral responsibility; whereas Faith is expressing a complete lack of responsibility. We contend that Faith, the slayer who goes bad, is merely fleeing, in Sartrean "bad faith" from the guilt of having mistakenly killed the deputy mayor. Faith is attempting to flee from responsibility by rationalizing what she has (admittedly accidentally) done. We have argued that Faith's entire story arc illustrates our point about not liking the person you have become because of your choices (Richardson and Rabb 2007a, 26-47; and/or 2007b, *Slayage* 6.3). Faith finally comes to realize that she has become, in her own words, a "Disgusting! Murderous bitch!" ("Who are You?" 4.16). As philosopher Karl Schudt argues in "Also Sprach Faith: The Problem of the Happy Rogue Vampire Slayer," Faith finally "sees the shape of her own life course, and it disgusts her" (32). We argue that although the narrative about Faith is not a rational argument proceeding by deduction from proven premisses, it is nevertheless a moral argument against not only the American ideal of radical individualism, which Faith represents, but also a narrative argument against the related utilitarian ethics as well. As Schudt concludes: "Rival moralities may not be able to be resolved rationally, but the results of choices in accordance with them differ greatly. Faith's life has become ugly" (32).

[13] Some more traditional ethicists might object here that we are not really dealing with a kind of moral argument. The claims that Faith does not like what she has become, and that her life has become "ugly," are, they would argue, not ethical judgments at all; they are rather aesthetic judgments. Schudt even admits that Faith "makes an aesthetic evaluation of herself and doesn't like what she sees" (32). Traditional ethicists might want to argue that such aesthetic evaluations have no bearing on ethical theory. They tend to maintain a strict distinction between ethics and aesthetics. However, over the past decade and a half, a growing number of philosophers, drawing upon what they call second generation cognitive science, have argued against this kind of compartmentalization of ethics over and against aesthetics. One of the most prominent of these thinkers is University of Oregon philosopher, Mark Johnson whom we discussed above. In his 1993 groundbreaking study, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*, he suggests, quite correctly we believe, that "the rigid separation of the aesthetic from the moral is rooted in the... Enlightenment view of cognition that we have inherited..." from 17th and 18th century science and philosophy (207). What Johnson calls the "Enlightenment folk theory of Faculty Psychology" was used to support the view that "our mental acts can be broken down into separate and distinct forms of judgment" (207).

[14] We have, for example, theoretical or epistemic judgments dealing with the way

the world is; moral judgments dealing with the way things ought to be and how we ought to behave; and finally aesthetic judgments "based on *feelings* and *imagination*, expressing our feeling response to certain perceptible forms of natural and artificial objects. It was regarded as crucial not to confuse moral with aesthetic judgments" (207). Morality after all was thought to be based on reason. According to the "Enlightenment folk theory of Faculty Psychology," in moral judgment the will uses rules or maxims derived from the faculty of pure *a priori* practical reason (duty) to keep our emotions, feelings and desires in line. Some such view is as old as Plato and probably reaches its most sophisticated articulation in the 18th century through the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). What we believe Johnson's work puts beyond dispute is in his words: "Those folk theories that are based on Enlightenment Faculty Psychology, its distinction among types of judgment, and its correlative distinction among realms of experience (i.e., the theoretical, moral, and aesthetic) are, for the most part, shown to be wrong by cognitive science" (208). This is a very important finding. It underlines the significance of the subtitle of Johnson's study "*Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*." As we have said, we find it intriguing that Whedon's narratives seem to have very similar implications for ethics.

[15] When the *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* was first published, back in 1993, Johnson felt compelled to justify the main title. At one point he goes so far as to say "I began this book with the observation that many people are likely to regard the term 'moral imagination' as an oxymoron, a juxtaposition of two contradictory concepts" (207) He goes on to explain "Their reason for holding this mistaken view is that they accept the *Moral Law* conception of morality as a system of moral laws derived by pure reason alone, whereas they associate imagination with art, creativity, and our general capacity to *break* rules and transcend our present concepts" (207). Indeed, Johnson begins the introduction to his study: "My central thesis is that human beings are fundamentally *imaginative* moral animals." This he immediately admits "is a provocative and potentially disruptive thesis, for if we take seriously the imaginative dimensions of human understanding and reasoning, we will discover that certain basic assumptions of our shared Western conception of morality are highly problematic," and he concludes therefore "that there are many things wrong with our received view of moral reasoning as consisting primarily in discerning the appropriate universal moral principle that tells us the single 'right thing to do' in a given situation" (1).

[16] Though Margaret Somerville's book, *The Ethical Imagination*, was published less than a decade and a half after Johnson's *Moral Imagination*, Somerville sees no need to justify her title. There is not even a hint that putting the concepts "ethical" and "imagination" together in her title would ever be regarded as an oxymoron. Of course she is trying to be provocative in her study. As we have seen, she argues that something more than reason is required in order to deal with complex moral issues, and she does think that narrative and myth are important. But Somerville makes no mention of either cognitive science in general or Mark Johnson's work in particular. Still, we contend something has changed in the field of ethics in the last 15 years that makes the notion of an ethical or moral imagination not only intelligible, but actually an acceptable—and indeed necessary—concept. This change is bound up with recent findings in the field of cognitive science over the same decade and a half confirming that "[m]oral deliberation is fundamentally imaginative and takes the form of a dramatic rehearsal" which involves imagining possible courses of action without having to physically endure the negative consequences of paths we decide ought not to be taken. Given that this kind of imagining as story telling or narrative is also an art, "[m]oral conduct is helpfully conceived on the model of aesthetic perception and artistic creation" (Fesmire 4).

[17] The role of imagination in ethics has been revealed by recent findings in second generation cognitive science, particularly the centrality of so-called radial categories and metaphor in our thinking. A strictly rational theory of ethics (as opposed to an imaginative one) presupposes what are called classical categories. Classical categories can be thought of, metaphorically, as containers, and something is either in the container or outside of it, either a member of said category or not, making traditional logic with its binary notions of "true" or "false" (1 or 0) easily applicable. But cognitive science has shown that things are not that simple. Many of the categories we deal with are not classical categories. In fact the following have been described as "especially bad examples" of classical categories: "'human beings,' 'diseases,' 'geniuses,' 'genetic defects,' 'pathogens,' and 'mental illness'" (Wright 14). These, and many others like them, are what cognitive scientists have identified as *radial* categories. Such categories cannot be thought of as simple containers.

Membership is "not an all or nothing matter" (Wright 14). Some members are considered more representative than others. Such categories are considered "radial" because "Representative members...are metaphorically placed in the centre...Less and less representative members are imaginatively farther and farther away from the center, giving the category a radial structure" (Wright 15).

[18] Think of tree rings or a child's drawing of the solar system with the planetary orbits represented as perfect circles around the sun. The solar system is not a bad metaphor for radial categories, given that there is now some dispute about whether the outermost planet, Pluto, is even a planet. It would be a better metaphor if we replaced the sun with a prototypical planet that is the most representative kind of planet, and had the next most representative on the orbit closest to it, and so on radiating outward to Pluto, which may not be a planet at all. Cognitive scientist and physician Gary Wright, in doing a Ph.D. in Philosophy with Mark Johnson, discovered that in medicine, for example, "the overall 'disease' category is *radial* not classical" (56). Picture a number of adjacent solar systems each exerting a competing "pull" both on their own and on their neighbours' marginal or peripheral planets. As Wright points out, metaphors function as the glue or gravitational pull holding radial categories together: "Analogies and metaphors act cognitively like forces (such as gravity) or links in that the easily identified clear cut central members present a cognitive pull on the marginal examples drawing them into association. At the very margins of the general 'disease' category the most peripheral examples wobble in their orbits, so to speak, partially gravitating toward other large categories in the lexical neighbourhood of disease: 'old age,' 'weakness,' 'crime,' 'harm,' 'suffering,' 'eccentricity' and 'infertility'" (56). On the very margins it is easy to switch from talk about disease and illness to talk about a condition. As Wright points out, the "person having it...may not regard it as a disease to be rid of...because the person...affected, such as a deaf person or someone with dwarfism, might take issue with society's definition and portrayal of her condition as an illness, instead of appreciating some of its aspects as positive" (64). For a simpler example think of the color "red" as a prototype. Is a color on the periphery of the radial category, redness, "reddish blue" or "bluish red"?

[19] Ethical issues usually arise when we attempt to deal with the more complex marginal members of radial categories, those on the outer rim so to speak. In other words, moral judgment, like clinical judgment, is required precisely when the rules are no longer helpful. Wright, in discussing the category "human being" observes that "some candidate entities exemplify...borderline cases of human, which may be included or excluded depending on our purposes at a given time: embryos, fetuses, neonates...patients undergoing attempted resuscitation thirty minutes into a cardiac arrest, those who are 'brain dead' or in a persistent vegetative state...the terminally senile, cadavers, fictional characters and Theodore Roosevelt in an old newsreel" (14-15). Buffy Summers, for example, is a fictional character, but compared to the evil monsters it is her destiny to battle, she is a human being as opposed to, say, a vampire or a Fyarl demon. On the other hand, Buffy is not an historical figure. She is a fictional character; she is not a human being and never was. And, in *Firefly* episode "Bushwacked" (1002), Mal and Jayne agree that "Reavers ain't men. Or they forgot how to be. Now they're just...nothing. They got out to the edge of the galaxy, to that place of nothing. And that's what they became." However, Shepherd Book argues that the Reavers are in fact human, "Too long removed from civilization, perhaps—but men." From the standpoint of radial categories, we find it interesting that in *Firefly* and *Serenity* Reaver space is the outer rim, farthest from the central planets, in fact beyond even the outer planets, at the very margins of colonized space. This Whedonesque materializing of the metaphorical makes the Reavers not only unsettling marginalized members of the radial category "human being," but quite literally on the margins of the newly settled solar system.

[20] So, what is the prototypical example of human being, the clear cut case at the centre of this radial category? At one time, not that long ago, it might have been something like "white adult Anglo-Saxon heterosexual male." Further and further away from the center of this radial category would be women, who were considered the property of fathers or husbands, then their children, non Anglo-Saxon white males, non-white males, and so on to the outer reaches where we might find embryos, fetuses, stem cells, werewolves, vampires with souls, Reavers, and balls of mystical energy that look like one's little sister, the last of which also illustrates the radial nature of the category "key." Today, of course we find the white heterosexual male prototype of the "human" horrifying, morally grotesque. Certainly other cultures would have very different prototypical

examples. This gives us a clue about how we can and do alter prototypes. There are two issues here. One is how prototypes are culturally determined, and therefore how they can be altered, in the process of cross cultural or transperspectival conversations, for example. We will return to this important notion and the way in which Whedon deals with it in a moment. The other issue concerns how our thinking, as a matter of empirical fact, utilizes prototypes and radial categories. This is something that is not culturally dependent but has been shown to be a result of the structure of the human brain itself.

[21] Philosopher Mark Johnson, working with well-known cognitive scientist George Lakoff, cites a number of disciplines within cognitive science whose results corroborate one another concerning prototypes and radial categories as well as the use of metaphor linking them. They discuss in some detail linguistics, historical linguistics, cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, and gesture analysis, including studies of Native American sign language (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 83). They argue that although all scientific findings are open to change on the basis of further evidence, the disciplines cited give us converging evidence rendering the findings of cognitive science stable knowledge: "The methodology of convergent evidence and the masses of different types of evidence minimize the probability that the results will be an artifact of any specific methodology" (89). We suggest that cognitive literary theory, such as that exemplified in the book *Shakespeare's Brain*, and our own work on Whedon's narrative ethics, could be added to the convergent evidence corroborating cognitive science.

[22] Lakoff and Johnson, Steven Fesmire, and Gary Wright, as well as many other philosophers and scientists writing in this field all cite the work of psychologist Eleanor Rosch on prototypes and radial categories. Her experiments with the category of birds are cited so often that they have almost become the prototype of experiments on prototypes. In some of her experiments she shows subjects photographs of birds and other creatures, requiring subjects to hit a button as soon as they see a bird. She measures the time it takes from the appearance of the photograph to the hitting of the button. It turns out that birds like robins and sparrows are the prototypes, at least in the West, since they are identified as birds much more quickly than, say, kiwis, ostriches, and penguins. Other experiments require subjects to identify as true or false sentences like "chickens are birds." Again, the identification is much quicker with robins and sparrows than it is with even chickens or ducks. She also discovered an asymmetry in the treatment of members of this category. Subjects who were told that robins had succumbed to a particular disease also indicated that they believed that ducks in the area would also be at risk, whereas, if they were told that the ducks had the disease they did not believe that the robins were in any danger (Rosch 1973, 1977, 1978). These and many similar experiments demonstrate that we tend to think in terms of prototypes and do not treat all members of radial categories in the same way.

[23] Johnson argues that "If a good many of our basic moral concepts (such as person, rights, harm, justice, love) and many of the concepts that define kinds of action (e.g., murder, lie, educate, natural, sex) have internal prototype structure, then Moral Law theories must be rejected" (189). Hence we argue that principles are for prototypes. Johnson explains, "they 'work' for the prototypical cases—the nonproblematic ones—about which there is widespread agreement within moral traditions. What moral laws we have are precisely those that are formulated to fit the prototypical cases, the central members of a category" (190). Indeed many of the problems in ethics today arise out of developments in technology not even conceivable when the ethical principles were formulated. Johnson observes, "The emergence of new technologies, such as recent reproductive technologies, has created new moral problems and situations that neither existed nor were even imagined when certain 'standards' of sexual, familial, and biomedical practice were gradually formulated in our moral tradition...events such as the development of in vitro fertilization and genetic engineering have confronted us with possibilities that might actually require us to revise our concepts of personhood and our assumptions about what is 'natural' in the reproductive process" (106).

[24] This should make us think twice about any principle in favour of the "natural" such as that introduced and defended by Margaret Somerville. She actually argues "principle-based ethicists believe that some things are inherently wrong and therefore must not be undertaken, no matter how much good could result. The use of a basic presumption in favour of the natural can help such ethicists to establish the outcomes they argue for" (107). Cognitive science has demonstrated that it is natural to think in terms of

prototypes. However, allowing our actions to be governed by negative stereotypes is hardly ethical behaviour. Such prototypes or stereotypes are usually unconscious, or, as we would prefer to say, preconscious, since the brain uses them to organize our conscious experience. It takes psychological experiments like those conducted by Eleanor Rosch and colleagues to bring them to light. Only then can such prototypes be critically examined.

[25] Now that cognitive science has shown us that the mind employs radial categories and organizes experience in terms of prototypes, how do we deal with them? As we noted above, the category "human being" or "person" has, in the recent past, used the white heterosexual male as prototype. Early feminists were criticized for suggesting that women in the workplace should act more like prototypical males in order to achieve equality. One of the more dramatic expressions of this criticism was that by then president of Mount Saint Vincent University, Dr. E. Margaret Fulton. In her 1979 paper "The Status of Women in Canada" she coined the term "pseudales" to describe women in the corporate world who get ahead using the same cutthroat methods as their male counterparts. The concept is a contraction of 'pseudo' (fake or pretend) and 'male'—pseudale, pseudo male (35). Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a narrative portraying a much more contemporary variety of feminism. His male characters are comfortable with strong women, and often call upon Buffy for help. Buffy herself, though strong enough to slay vampires, has a fashion-conscious "feminine side" and would often rather go shopping than fight monsters. She frequently sacrifices her life as a normal teenaged girl, and on not one but two occasions her life itself, in order to care for and help others. She is a moral exemplar, living a love ethic of self-sacrifice while resisting or rebelling against rules laid down by the patriarchal Watchers' Council. Whedon's narrative certainly challenges patriarchal prototypes.

[26] In fact, right from the first viewing of the opening moments of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, we can see Whedon challenging the stereotypes assumed by the audience. The seemingly innocent blonde in the private schoolgirl uniform being lured into the dark and empty high school turns out to be the vampire Darla, and the sexually aggressive and dominating boy expecting to have his way with her turns out to be the helpless victim, a nice reversal of both gender and genre stereotypes ("Welcome to the Hellmouth," 1001). This challenge to traditional stereotypes continues throughout the entire seven seasons of *Buffy* and on into *Angel*, *Firefly*, and *Serenity*. Even in season eight of *Buffy*, the current canonical graphic novel serial, we find Willow defending the negative stereotype of a thrice-demon while at the same time acknowledging that she herself represents the counterexample to various stereotypes.

[27] Responding to Dawn's question about why everyone seems to be against the guy who has had such a large effect on her, Willow says, "Um, because he's a thrice-demon? I'm as sensitive to profiling as the next gay wiccan Jewess, but not every stereotype is untrue" (8. 7, *No Future for You Part II*). And of course earlier seasons of *Buffy*, the episodes on the Initiative, for example, criticize covert government paramilitary institutions for using traditional stereotypes, classical categories, and binary thinking—"Demons bad, people good....Something wrong with that theorem?" ("New Moon Rising," 4019). It is revealing that the chief exemplar of the Initiative, Dr. Maggie Walsh, is killed by her own creation, appropriately named Adam, a creature that refuses to fit into a simple classical category and is even capable of upgrading, and hence changing, himself (or itself). Just as the Initiative cannot control, understand, or defeat its own creation, so the Alliance in *Serenity* finds that they have inadvertently created the uncontrollably savage Reavers. Significantly, it is River, whose name reverberates with "Reaver," who is deeply affected by the sudden realization that we (the Alliance) made the Reavers. The very young schoolgirl River had criticized the Alliance by saying, "We meddle...people don't like to be meddled with. We tell them what to do, what to think...we're in their homes and in their heads and we haven't the right. We're meddling" (*Serenity*). River's physical battle with and defeat of the Reavers near the end of the movie symbolizes the explosion of the savage redskin stereotype Agnes Curry attributes to the Reavers. We created the stereotype, and likewise, with Whedon's help, we overcome it.

[28] Hollywood has much to answer for in the perpetuation of negative stereotypes of Native Americans. However, Curry seems to conflate killing Reavers with killing Indians, as opposed to destroying the stereotype of the "savage redskin" which the Reavers represent, as we argue at length in our paper "Reavers and Redskins: Creating the Frontier Savage." Rhonda Wilcox and Tanya Cochran, in reviewing and editing this paper on the

Reavers for their book *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier*, suggested we look more closely at the work of Jane Espenson, since we criticize her interpretation of the Reavers and also discuss the *Buffy* episode "Pangs" (4008) written by her. Their recommendation led to a most startling discovery: cognitive scientist George Lakoff and philosopher of cognitive science, Mark Johnson, both independently thank Jane Espenson for her contributions to research in cognitive science.

[29] It turns out Espenson did undergraduate work and graduate research in cognitive science at Berkeley with Lakoff, who singles her out as the graduate student whose own research has contributed to the theory of metaphor. In discussing what he calls location-object duality in our use of metaphors, Lakoff praises Espenson's work in the field: "Duality is a newly-discovered phenomenon. The person who first discovered it in the event structure system was Jane Espenson, a graduate student at Berkeley who stumbled upon it in the course of her research on causation metaphors. Since Espenson's discovery, other extensive dualities have been found in the English metaphor system" (227). For an example of object-location duality think of the sentence "The end of this paper looms up before us." Here the end is an object, like a bus, bearing down on us. Compare "We are coming to the end of this paper." Here the end is a fixed location in the "life is a journey" metaphor system and it is we who are in motion toward it. Such metaphors are pervasive. Consider, for example, "She clawed her way to the top" (location), as opposed to "Throughout her career, promotions were just handed to her" (object). And to think Jane Espenson of the Whedonverse is responsible for this discovery. Mark Johnson, in his book *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*, also acknowledges Espenson: "Jane Espenson...at the Institute for Cognitive Studies, University of California at Berkeley helped me work out some of the metaphorical analyses included in chapter 2" (Johnson xiv). Jane Espenson, as Executive Story Editor, Producer, and Co-Executive Producer as well as writer or co-writer of more than twenty episodes of *Buffy* and episodes of *Angel* and *Firefly*, has had a direct influence on the Whedonverse. Whedon's narratives certainly challenge patriarchal prototypes even before Espenson joined the team. We find that Espenson's training in cognitive science confirms Whedon's more intuitive practice in confronting prototypes. Hence the complexity of moral perspective required by the metaphoric work in "Pangs" (4008) *Firefly's* Reavers, and so much more of the Whedonverse.

[30] The prototypes and metaphors, which cognitive science has shown that our brains automatically use, are often regarded as prejudices and certainly are prejudices when they become negative stereotypes. However, we have learned from cognitive science that it is not possible to think without such prejudices, at least in the form of prejudgments, for it is through these prototypes that we make sense of the world. As Johnson argues, citing the German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer, "Our prejudgments are conditions for our being able to make sense of things. Without them, we can understand nothing....Rather than overthrowing all our prejudgments, we need to open them up to possible transformation through our encounters with others, whose prejudgments may confront our own" (131-132). We make sense of our world in terms of our expectations (pre-understandings) which are either confirmed or modified by further experience (cf. McPherson and Rabb 2003, 136-142). As we noted at the outset of this paper, Margaret Somerville allows that such experience can be vicarious, through the use of mythology and literature, including popular culture. As we argue in more detail in our book, *The Existential Joss Whedon*, "This is an area in which the artistic imagination in all of its forms (literary, visual, filmic, etc.) can be used as a form of moral thought" (169). The epigraph to our book is a line from "Homecoming" (3.5): "Well, it sure ain't no philosophy class, now, is it." Though not like a formal class in moral philosophy, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* certainly does more than its fair share of philosophizing and mentoring us in the methods of moral deliberation. And, as it is often said in *Buffy*, "Here endeth the lesson" ("Never Kill a Boy on the First Date," 1.5; "Fool for Love," 5.7; and "Showtime," 7.11).

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