The Black Reaching Out: An Anarchist Analysis of *Firefly*[1]

James Rocha

Song of the Black

[1] A number of *Firefly* (2002) commentators have argued that the television show presents a libertarian message (Goldsmith; Sturgis; Sanchez; Hinson). A show's central message would be libertarian if it presented a positive portrayal of some version of libertarian philosophy: that is, it supports the rights of individuals over those of social groups or society in general, bases morality in self-ownership and consent, and/or rejects strong positive obligations to help others simply because they are in need. While much speaks against locating a single, central message in a TV show as complex as *Firefly*, it is possible for a single vision or motif to generally represent the main theme of even a complex show. Assuming it makes sense to talk about the most central message of *Firefly*, much in *Firefly* speaks in favor of a libertarian interpretation. First, the lead character, Captain Malcolm "Mal" Reynolds is clearly a libertarian: he stands for individual freedom and against central governmental interference in individuals' lives. Jayne Cobb is an even stricter libertarian. Jayne is the John Galt of space: Jayne will bow out of any activity in which he does not see the "profit" or "percentage."[2] Jayne certainly would never, for example, intentionally give away money for the sake of helping a bunch of mudders.

[2] Not only are some of the main characters libertarians, but the big bad in the show—the Alliance—is the typical libertarian villain: an all-powerful government looking to spread its meddling throughout the 'verse. If you were going to write a libertarian tale, you would need a villain just like the Alliance. When you add in a theme song that sounds

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like the lyricized premises of a libertarian argument, you quickly see why astute commentators see *Firefly* as a libertarian show.

[3] Still, this interpretation has its set of difficulties. First, Joss Whedon, the show runner, certainly is no libertarian. The rest of his oeuvre—*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Angel* (1999-2004), *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* (2008), *Dollhouse* (2009-2010)—includes shows that present messages that are either anti-libertarian or, at least, not very consistent with libertarianism.[3]

[4] More importantly, *Firefly* itself hardly presents an entirely consistent example of libertarian philosophy.[4] Much of *Firefly* flies in the face of libertarianism, or, at best, does not present a powerful image for that view. It is true that Mal has libertarian principles and provides libertarian critiques of the Alliance. Yet Mal's actions speak more loudly than his words: while Mal's penchant for self-sacrifice for the sake of others, especially those in his crew, is technically consistent with libertarianism, it certainly would not be the best way to represent strict libertarian values. Besides Mal and Jayne—the latter of whom, frankly, is largely comic relief—most of the characters are not libertarians. Furthermore, given Whedon's strong commitment to feminism, it is odd to judge the show only through the eyes of the two most masculine male characters, instead of the lead female characters, such as Inara Serra, Kaywinnet Lee "Kaylee" Frye, Zoe Washburne, or River Tam, or the more feminist male characters: Simon Tam, Shepherd Derrial Book, and Hoban "Wash" Washburne. None of these other characters appear to be libertarian.

[5] There are a few ways to respond to these seeming inconsistencies in the show's central theme. Perhaps the easiest response is to deny there is any such central theme, as shown by these inconsistencies. One could also bolster a libertarian interpretation by diminishing or explaining away the non-libertarian aspects of the show. Or one could deny the libertarian interpretation and come up with a distinct interpretation that diminishes or explains away the libertarian aspects. This paper will argue for yet another response: the libertarian and non-libertarian aspects of the show can be reconciled by reading *Firefly* as an anarchist show.

[6] Anarchists, like libertarians, love freedom, hate government, and believe in working for a world where individuals set and live under their own rules. Anarchism, going beyond libertarianism, critiques all forms of hierarchical power, which is more consistent with Whedon's opus. While libertarians see the state as the main obstacle to freedom and accept hierarchy in other forms (such as in capitalist businesses), anarchists critique a wide variety of hierarchal organizations as obstacles to freedom, such as secret societies (*Buffy*'s Watchers' Council or *The Cabin in the Woods*' [2012] Facility), law firms (*Angel*'s Wolfram and Hart), or corporations (*Dollhouse*'s Rossum). Further, anarchists, in stark contrast to libertarians, believe that society should be organized around egalitarian collectives where individuals have strong positive obligations to help each other and others in need, similar to idealized versions (since all of these groups, at times, fall into the pitfalls of hierarchal thinking) of the Scooby Gang, Angel Investigations, or the Avengers.

[7] An anarchist interpretation provides a moral analysis that is more fitting with all of the characters (including both Mal's and Jayne's distrust of centralized power and the more substantive, positive morality of the other characters). This argument will not establish that *Firefly* is definitively an anarchist TV show—there are, of course, alternative ways to analyze the show that will not be fully considered here. Yet, by switching from a libertarian to an anarchist interpretation, we are able to both better fit *Firefly* into the Whedonverses and understand the conflicts across and within its multi-dimensional characters. And while the comics and the film may support this anarchist interpretation, for the sake of brevity, this paper will mostly concentrate on interpreting the TV show. The argument will both show why an anarchist interpretation is a better alternative to a libertarian one, and set the standard for finding a single, consistent interpretation of the show.

"Stealing from the Rich; Selling to the Poor"—Hoban Washburne ("Ariel" 1.9)

[8] "Libertarianism" and "anarchism" are both generic terms; each encompasses a wide range of distinct and often conflicting views. To point out an obvious conflict, there is both a right-libertarianism and a left-libertarianism, which differ greatly.[5] To clarify these notions, it is

useful to pin down meanings for each term—without seeking so much precision that the points made here become only applicable to a limited set of theories. To this end, this paper will concentrate on right-libertarianism and egalitarian anarchism.

[9] The central idea behind libertarianism starts with the notion that each person owns his or her self. Let us call this the "self-ownership claim" (Narveson 66-68). A person's self includes her mind and body. If a person owns her self, then it follows that she can do whatever she wants with her mind and body, as long as that action is consistent with every other person owning his or her own self. So it is wrong for River to hit Jayne, even if she uses her own hand, because that interferes with Jayne's right to protect his body.

[10] Right-libertarians believe that owning one's self entails the ability to own objects, either through meeting some simple test for first obtaining the object (first one to see it, use it, change it, etc.) or by obtaining the object from another person through a justified transfer (consider when Jayne attempted to exchange his gun, Vera, for a woman, Saffron—though, obviously, he was mistaken to think of Saffron as an object, but that is the basic idea) (Hayek 207-9; Nozick 171-182). Once a person takes ownership over an object, self-ownership extends to the object: the person can do whatever is desired with the object as long as it is consistent with the same extended self-ownership for all others.

[11] Finally, libertarians accept that some people choose to allow others to infringe on their liberty for the sake of an increase in liberty elsewhere. To this end, individuals enter into consensual relationships. For example, Badger can consent to give Mal a certain amount of Badger's own money, which his self-ownership extends over, in exchange for Mal consenting to use his self and his ship to gather some goods for Badger. Since they consented to this arrangement, neither is in fact infringing the other's liberty: each one has expanded his liberty in one way (either obtaining money or labor and goods) by voluntarily limiting his liberty in the other way (giving up money or labor and goods).

[12] Put roughly, the strict right-libertarian argues that the above pretty much fully explains morality, which basically consists in original self-ownership, the extension to include objects, and the ability to

consent with others (Narveson 110-184, esp. 165). It is morally permissible to do anything that results either from the use of your self or the use of your objects, provided that you have obtained those objects in justified manners and your uses do not interfere with anyone else's extended self-ownership. It is immoral to do something that interferes with the extended self-ownership of others, unless they consent to allow your "interference."

[13] Anarchists start with a shared belief that there can be no justified state (Wolff; Marshall). However, that is perhaps where their commonality ends. Anarchists sharply differ over what a justified society without a state would look like. For example, anarcho-capitalists are right-libertarians taken to the full limits of self-ownership's implications (Friedman). According to anarcho-capitalists, if anyone who interferes with liberty is in the wrong, then the state is wrong not only when it taxes citizens to give to the poor (as almost any libertarian would agree), but also when it taxes to pay for national defense (contrary to libertarians who endorse a minimal state for defensive purposes).

[14] On the other side of the anarchist coin are several viewpoints that fit under "egalitarian anarchism." Egalitarian anarchism holds that not only is the state unjustified, but so is any hierarchical organization that infringes on liberty. Just as the citizen who is made to pay taxes for either a health care system or a war she does not believe in has her liberty infringed, liberty is similarly infringed for the janitor who must keep a job she hates in order to pay rent to a landlord who provides unhealthy living conditions. For egalitarian anarchists, a society is justified if it lacks hierarchical hindrances to liberty, regardless of whether those hindrances are political, economic, or social. Different kinds of egalitarian anarchists, such as collectivist anarchists, communist anarchists, and anarcho-syndicalists, will have different visions on how to arrange society to avoid liberty-infringing hierarchy (Marshall 6-11). One method is to avoid the creation and legitimization of property. In a society where individuals do not own, objects are available for all, and inequality is in many ways impossible.[6]

[15] The anarcho-capitalist or the extreme libertarian may doubt whether the egalitarian anarchist should count as a true anarchist since the latter will not allow the extension of liberty to include owning a

factory where workers augment the owner's profits. The egalitarian anarchist, in response, doubts whether the anarcho-capitalist or the libertarian truly respect liberty since they would allow the liberty of workers to be squashed in the name of increasing profits for the bosses. The anarcho-capitalist would respond that the worker consents to a limitation of liberty in exchange for the boss's consent to forego money for wages. The egalitarian anarchist would respond that the worker's agreement should not count as consensual since it was made in exploited circumstances derived from a morally unacceptable power hierarchy. The anarcho-capitalist will challenge that there is nothing in the standard libertarian rules of morality that make the circumstances count as immoral: they may be worse for the worker, but not due to any moral failure of the boss. The individual moves of this debate provide useful information about each position, but obviously the two positions are unlikely to find agreement.

[16] There is then an important set of differences between a right-libertarian and an egalitarian anarchist. A good way to highlight their differences is through two interconnected distinctions: negative vs. positive liberty and negative vs. positive duties (Carter). A person enjoys negative liberty if no person intentionally interferes with her ability to act. Right-libertarians prize negative liberty as the direct consequence of the self-ownership claim: if you own yourself, then you are truly free if no one interferes with your ability to act. Someone can enjoy maximal negative liberty and be unable to do anything meaningful in their lives. Imagine, for example, a person born with disabilities severe enough that she cannot find employment without assistance (say, a wheelchair and van). Such a disabled person would have negative liberty if no one interferes with her, but she may feel there is little she can do without the assistance needed to find work.

[17] Positive liberty refers to the freedom to perform acts of some substance. Libertarians argue that no one should have their negative liberty violated to help others obtain positive liberty (Narveson 22-31). So if a person does not wish to give money to a severely impoverished person, then it would be wrong, according to libertarians, to interfere with her negative liberty by coercing the person, such as through a coercive taxation system, in order to help the impoverished person

obtain positive liberty. It is consistent with libertarianism that she could choose to donate her money as charity, but it is important that neither can charity be required of her nor can she be deemed to be immoral if she does not choose to give. Her choice not to give is simply an expression of her self-ownership. To deem her expression of self-ownership as immoral is to misunderstand the very core of libertarian morality: it is *her* self-ownership, and she determines what is right and wrong for her (provided that she does not infringe on the self-ownership of others).

[18] The egalitarian anarchist supports a society where negative liberty and positive liberty are both enjoyed by the people (Marshall 36). The simplest way to achieve this result is to deny the extension of self-ownership. People own themselves, and their negative liberty is violated when you interfere with a person, but they do not own objects. Instead, objects are shared among all the people who need them to enjoy their positive liberty. As noted, the right-libertarian will think that a person cannot be free if they cannot *control* objects. The egalitarian anarchist, on the other hand, will argue that a society where everyone has negative liberty, but only some people enjoy positive liberty because they control the vast majority of objects, is a horrible society for everyone except those few. As Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta put it, "That aspiration towards unlimited freedom, if not tempered by a love for mankind and by the desire that all should enjoy equal freedom, may well create rebels who, if they are strong enough, soon become exploiters and tyrants, but never anarchists" (24).

[19] For this reason, the egalitarian anarchist believes that everyone in an anarchist society will accept their positive duty to help each other (Godwin). A positive duty requires that the agent does something to meet it, whereas an agent can meet a negative duty through inaction. "Give to those in need" is a positive duty. "Do not kill, steal, or cheat" are negative duties. The positive duty to help others would not be enforced in an anarchist society: there are no legal or political enforcement mechanisms in anarchism. Instead, it is a positive moral duty that agents will recognize when their moral values are no longer warped by a paternalistic state that invades our ability to think clearly on moral matters. When people live under a state that is constantly saying it

will take care of people and make moral decisions for them, people get morally lazy. The egalitarian anarchist believes people will realize their moral codes for themselves if left to think. These moral codes will include both positive obligations to help others achieve their positive liberty and negative obligations to respect negative liberty.

[20] To put it simply, anarchists and libertarians agree that a powerful, central government is an unjustified intrusion on people's lives. Where they disagree is on what should replace it. Right-libertarians would prefer a minimal government even if it allowed inequalities to arise from each person exercising their liberty in justified ways. From here on in this essay, for simplicity's sake, the term "libertarians" will refer to right libertarians. Egalitarian anarchists foresee a society where self-interest is aligned with everyone's ability to enjoy a certain amount of positive liberty because there is a moral drive for people to uphold their positive obligations to each other. From here on in this essay, the term "anarchists" will refer to egalitarian anarchists.

[21] Libertarians and anarchists are both anti-government, and so *Firefly*'s critique of the Alliance in itself may not settle which approach provides a superior interpretation of the show. The difference comes out where characters are morally called upon to act for the positive liberty of others. Thus, to test the dueling interpretations, we should examine how the characters react to positive obligations to help others' positive liberty.

"No More Sadistic Crap Legitimized by Florid Prose"—Simon Tam ("War Stories" 1.10)

[22] If the key to deciding between a libertarian and an anarchist analysis lies in positive obligations, then perhaps the main dynamic to examine is that between Mal and Simon. Mal is a libertarian, but Simon certainly is not. Simon embraces positive obligations to the point of giving up all that he owned, for the sake of his sister. Importantly, one can argue that Simon did not do this just because River is his sister, but because that is who he is.

[23] Not only does Whedon say Mal is a libertarian (Sanchez), but there are clear instances where Mal embraces libertarianism in a non-anarchist way. This point is not about all the wonderful lines where Mal speaks against governments, such as when he says, "That's what

governments are for—get in a man's way" ("Serenity" 1.1), or "That sounds like the Alliance. Unite all the planets under one rule so that everybody can be interfered with or ignored equally" ("The Train Job" 1.2). Anti-government and pro-freedom lines do not really distinguish between libertarianism and anarchism.

[24] What marks Mal out as a libertarian is how he runs his ship. After first buying Serenity, Mal explains to Zoe that Serenity can be their freedom: they can, "live like people. A small crew—them as feel the need to be free. Take jobs as they come. And we'll never have to be under the heel of nobody ever again. No matter how long the arm of the Alliance might get, we'll just get us a little further" ("Out of Gas" 1.8). But Mal will have his heel, at least a bit, on his crew as he will be *freer* to make decisions on *his* boat—which he definitely sees as an extension of his self-ownership. When Lawrence Dobson shoots Kaylee, Mal decides he will kill Simon and River if Simon, whom he blames, cannot save Kaylee's life. Wash responds, "Can we maybe vote on the whole murdering people issue?" But Mal tells him, "We don't vote on my ship because my ship is not the rutting town hall" ("Serenity" 1.1). In Mal's libertarian viewpoint, owning the ship allows him to order around the people who consented to work for him and, thus, consented to give up liberty rights to him. From an anarchist perspective, Mal has merely recreated the problem of governments: instead of a government telling people what to do, Mal infringes on his crew's freedom.

[25] If Mal stands out as a clear libertarian, Simon presents the opposite perspective. It is not necessarily inconsistent with libertarianism for Simon to give up everything he values, including his life as a doctor in Capital City on Osiris, to save his sister. Libertarians obviously can care about their family members or voluntarily engage in self-sacrifice. Libertarianism just does not require anyone to sacrifice as Simon did: a positive obligation to sacrifice for others would be inconsistent with our self-ownership. The question, then, is whether Simon helps his sister out of a positive moral obligation or *just* because he loves her or sees helping siblings as important, but not morally required.

[26] Because Simon likely acts out of both love and obligation, it is not a useful case. To get a cleaner case, let us examine how Simon deals with Jayne. Jayne betrays Simon by trying to sell him to the

Alliance in "Ariel" (1.9). From Jayne's perspective, why not? There is a reward for turning Simon in, and Jayne has made no consensual agreement with Simon. Perhaps it would be an infringement of the Tams' negative liberty to turn them in, but Jayne could rationalize it as a justified infringement since they are fugitives.

[27] When Simon finds out that Jayne betrayed them, he waits until he has Jayne on his examination table, drugged, and under the knife to give him this speech:

> You're in a dangerous line of work, Jayne. Odds are you'll be under my knife again. Often. So I want you to understand one thing very clearly. No matter what you do or say or plot—no matter how you come down on us—I will never ever harm you. You're on this table, you're safe. 'Cause I'm your medic. And however little we may like or trust each other, we're on the same crew. Got the same troubles, same enemies, and more than enough of both. Now, we could circle each other and growl, sleep with one eye open, but that thought wearies me. I don't care what you've done. I don't know what you're planning on doing, but I'm trusting you. I think you should do the same. . . 'cause I don't see this working any other way. ("Trash" 1.11)

Simon sees himself as under immense positive obligations. Whether his patient is someone he loves or is a serious threat to his liberty and life, as well as that of his sister, he will go beyond the doctor's negative obligation of "do no harm," and will try to meet his positive obligation of helping others in need.

[28] While Jayne keeps trying to betray Simon, Mal does not, but instead changes because of Simon. Mal was originally more than happy to turn Simon over to Dobson in "Serenity." Mal is quite relieved that Dobson is after Simon, and offers to lock Simon in a cell until others from the Alliance come to take Simon away. Yet Dobson says that he considers everyone on the ship to be culpable, to which Mal responds, "Well, now. That has an effect on the landscape" ("Serenity" 1.1). Halfway through the first episode, Mal would have happily turned Simon in, perhaps because Mal does not feel that he has consented to take on any substantial positive obligations towards Simon at that point.

[29] Yet throughout the rest of the series, Mal thinks it would be wrong to betray Simon simply because he is a part of his crew. Consider when Simon asks why Mal brought the ship back to save him and River in "Safe":

> Simon: Captain, why did you come back for us?
>
> Mal: You're on my crew.
>
> Simon: But you don't even like me. Why'd you come back?
>
> Mal: You're on my crew. Why are we still talking about this? (1.5)

Of course, a libertarian need not find this exchange problematic. On the one hand, a libertarian could say that Mal has chosen to value everyone on his crew, often highly enough to risk his own life for them. It does not necessarily mean he has any natural positive obligations to them.

[30] Another explanation is that Mal feels he has made some consensual agreement when he took Simon on his ship. Against this view, Simon certainly does not think so: Simon realizes that Mal could leave him on some planet and completely fulfill his prior agreement to give Simon passage through the outer worlds over an indeterminate amount of time. Mal appears to owe Simon nothing from a libertarian perspective. Mal seems to think he owes it to Simon for some grander reason, as Book suspects in this exchange:

> Book: That young man's very brave.
>
> Mal: Yeah. [Then in a cartoonish voice,] He's my hero.
>
> Book: Gave up everything to free his sister from that place. Go from being a doctor on the central planets to hiding on the fringes of the system. There's not many would do that.
>
> Mal: Suppose not.
>
> Book: There's not many would take him in either. . .Why did you?
>
> Mal: Same reason I took you on board, Shepherd. I need the fare.
>
> Book laughs: There's neither of us can pay a tenth of what your crew makes on one of your jobs.
>
> Mal: Are you referring to our perfectly legitimate business enterprises?
>
> Book: I'm wondering why a man so anxious to fly under Alliance radar would house known fugitives. The Alliance had her in that institution for a purpose, whatever it was, and they will want her back. You're not overly fond of the boy. So why risk it?

> Mal sarcastically: Only because it's the right thing to do. . . .
> Book: I'm beginning to wonder if you yourself know why you're doing it. ("The Train Job" 1.2)

Shepherd Book, on the surface, represents the religious perspective. Deeper down, Book represents substantial moral thinking: he believes everyone is committed to being moral, including having positive obligations, and he understands that not everyone gets their moral commitments from religion. Here, Book thinks Mal has a moral code that goes beyond the less substantial libertarian morality: Mal is not merely choosing to help the Tams, but is *obligated* to help them. It is not that Mal is simply choosing to help the Tams since, as Book is careful to point out, Mal does not even like them and they endanger Mal's cherished freedom. Book knows Mal recognizes this inner conflict as well, though Book suspects that Mal, the libertarian, does not fully understand where his strong sense of positive obligation comes from. But Mal clearly realizes that he *must* risk everything—his life, his crew's lives, and his *liberty*—to save these siblings that he does not even like.

[31] Mal is a libertarian character, but this libertarian interpretation is really a *surface* interpretation (Lackey 68). That is not to say that it is incorrect: Mal really is a libertarian on the surface, but Book and others see that Mal is not a libertarian deep down. Consider Jayne's *expectation* that Mal will eventually turn in the Tams in this exchange with an incredulous Kaylee:

> Jayne: Yeah, well, we could all be rich if we handed [River] back.
> Kaylee: You're not even thinking that.
> Jayne: Mal is.
> Kaylee: That's not funny.
> Jayne: He ain't stupid. Why would he take on trouble like those two if there weren't no profit in it, hmm? Captain's got a move he ain't made yet, you'll see. ("The Train Job" 1.2)

Kaylee, notice, sees Mal quite differently than Jayne does. She knows that deep down, Mal would never turn River in. Of course, she is right. On the surface, Mal is a libertarian, and the commentators who have pointed this out are quite right about that. But deep down, as Book and Kaylee see, Mal is an anarchist who just does not know it yet—he needed the Tams to bring that out of him.

"A More or Less Killing Mood"—Hoban Washburne ("The Train Job" 1.2)

[32] Another way to test the anarchist analysis is to examine specific episodes. "The Train Job" (1.2) presents a fairly standard consensual arrangement between Niska and Mal. What makes this consent standard is not that all the requirements for consent (that it be freely made, adequately informed, and made by competent agents) are met, since Niska does not inform Mal what they will be stealing for him:

> Niska: Are you going to ask me what it is I need?
>
> Mal: As a rule, no.
>
> Niska: Yes. Good! You have reputation. Malcolm Reynolds gets it done is the talk. ("The Train Job" 1.2)

Thus, it is a standard consensual arrangement because the one condition for consent not met, the information condition, is explicitly *waived*. The fact that Mal waives the information requirement is what makes this episode particularly problematic for a libertarian interpretation. Niska has gotten Mal to consent to steal six crates of Pescaline D, a medicine desperately needed by the people of Paradiso due to their outbreak of Bowden's malady. Thus, there are two moral values in conflict: Mal upholding his consent versus helping strangers who desperately need medicine. Since the libertarian embraces the first value, while denying the obligatory nature of the latter, the episode provides a useful test for our two competing interpretations.

[33] One libertarian, P. Gardner Goldsmith, writing on this episode, praises Mal for choosing the latter: "when he realized how much harm he was doing to the poor people living under Alliance tyranny who were dependent on the drug to survive, Mal actually chose to *give up* his booty in favor of what was right" (59). This choice meant Mal was going against his consent, but Goldsmith explains that he still did the right thing there as well: "to stress Mal's strong moral stand, he then handed his payment for the job back to Niska's agents" (60).

[34] Unfortunately, Goldsmith tells us little about what implement in the libertarian's moral toolkit allows for this intuitively correct conclusion. Instead, Goldsmith concentrates on why the sheriff is better placed to make decisions for the local people (59-60). The problem is

that it is not clear that there is any such tool. We could say that it is wrong for Mal to steal, with which any libertarian would agree, but then it would have been wrong to steal without knowing what he was stealing in the first place. The show assumes, in part for the sake of the narrative, that Mal can steal and still be a good guy.

[35] What really motivates our intuitions that Mal *must* give the medicine back is that people desperately need it: they would not be able to live meaningful lives without it; thus, the medicine is required for their positive liberty. The positive obligation to provide positive liberty motivates Mal, as it should. Desperate need usually morally trumps past consensual agreements. At least, that is both what an anarchist would say and why we, the audience, are so relieved that Mal returns the medicine. That also is the kind of explanation Mal provides for why they are not just leaving with the medicine:

> Mal: We're not going.
> Wash: Not… Why?
> Zoe: We're bringing the cargo back.
> Jayne, who has been drugged by Simon: What? What do you mean "back"? I waited for you guys!
> Wash: What are you talking about? What about Niska? Won't this put him in more or
> less a killing mood?
> Mal: There's others need this more. ("The Train Job" 1.2)

It is because "others need this more" that Mal returns it. Not because his self-ownership indicates it is something he would value. Not because he has entered into some kind of consensual deal with those others—they are strangers to him. It is *their need* that clearly creates a positive obligation that Mal morally must fulfill.

[36] The libertarian in this position would seem committed to the value of consent since the consent was well made (Mal was free to turn down the job, he was a competent adult, and he *chose* not to be informed). Yet the show forces Mal into a situation where he has to see how positive liberty overcomes any high value being placed on consent. In the end, it is not even a hard decision as to what wins, positive liberty or consent:

> Sheriff: These are tough times. A man can get a job. He might not look too close at what that job is. But a man learns all the details of a situation like ours. Well, then he has a choice.
> Mal: I don't believe he does. ("The Train Job" 1.2)

Stealing Away Our Pain ("Jaynestown" 1.7)

[37] In "Jaynestown" (1.7), the mudders of Canton represent those people that Ayn Rand's libertarian heroes, such as John Galt or Howard Roark, would feel are morally in the wrong for demanding help for their positive liberty. As the viewers learn, Jayne never intended to help the mudders: instead, he accidentally dropped money on them while betraying his partner, Stitch, in a frantic escape to save his own life. Jayne had no intention to save the mudders, but they come to see him as a hero.

[38] Jayne loves not only being a hero, but also that the mudders fought the law in his name. Of course, there is a bit of a trick here: this is not the standard law; the mudders are not peasants, but are workers. Canton is a "company town." It is not just the government that the mudders are rebelling against, but their employer, who they feel is taking an unfair portion of the profits, which they make clear in song, declaring that Jayne "saw the magistrate takin' / Every dollar and leavin' five cents . . . " ("Jaynestown" 1.7). Their complaint is not simple in a libertarian picture—though anarchists, who attack the hierarchy of both governments and corporations, would easily and happily embrace the mudders as compatriots. After all, the anarchists would sympathize with the mudders' complaint that *Boss* Higgins, the magistrate, was taking too much of the profits from the workers. Libertarians may only complain that the boss should not also be the magistrate, but the boss would have the right to take 95% of the profits, as that would fall under his rights.

[39] The episode's key moment comes when a mudder makes a remarkable act of self-sacrifice. By this time, Stitch had already exposed Jayne as a fraud. When Stitch shoots at Jayne, the mudder, without any thought, jumps into the bullet's path, giving up his life in exchange for Jayne's. This completely confuses Jayne:

> Jayne: Don't make no sense. What . . Why the hell'd that mudder have to go and do that for, Mal? Jumpin' in front of the shotgun

> blast? Hell, there weren't a one of 'em understood what happened out there. They're probably stickin' that statue right back up.
> Mal: Most like.
> Jayne: I don't know why that eats at me so.
> Mal: It's my estimation that every man ever got a statue made of him was one kind of sommbitch or another. Ain't about you, Jayne. It's about what they need.
> Jayne: Don't make no sense. ("Train Job")

Jayne cannot understand someone who sees their positive duties so strongly that they would give up everything for another person. We cannot know for sure why the mudder did this, but perhaps the viewer does not find it as implausible as Jayne does. Not only had the mudders come to idealize Jayne, they also *like* him. At the end of the day, Jayne was a fraud, and that has to be a disappointment (if they believe Stitch), but he certainly did not deserve to die. Maybe the viewers are not as struck by its inexplicability as Jayne is, in part because we just see the self-sacrificing mudder as a good person—someone who really deserves a statue.

[40] "Jaynestown" thus presents an enigma to Jayne's strict libertarian mindset. Jayne's bewilderment represents the shortcomings in the libertarian moral philosophy. The mudders have jobs, earn enough to stay alive, and yet they are seeking heroes who recognize a positive duty to help them. The mudders represent the value of a self-sacrificing morality that libertarianism eschews. Anarchism, on the other hand, is able to critique seemingly consensual work relations that leave the workers impoverished, while also upholding self-sacrificing moral requirements as honorable and often necessary. Of course, to the libertarian Jayne, that just don't make sense.

"Who'd Help Us?" ("Heart of Gold" 1.13)

[41] As a final episode that chiefly concerns positive liberty, consider that everyone on the ship is willing to go fight to save the prostitutes from Rance Burgess on the moon of Deadwood, in "Heart of Gold" (1.13). Zoe even explains to the crew that each one must decide whether they want to go, since it will be dangerous and payment will be uncertain:

> Jayne: Don't much see the benefit in getting involved in strangers' troubles without a up-front price negotiated.
> Book: These people need assistance. The benefit wouldn't necessarily be for you.
> Jayne: That's what I'm saying.
> Zoe: No one's gonna force you to go, Jayne. As has been stated, this job is strictly speculative.
> Jayne: Good. Don't know these folks. Don't much care to.
> Mal: They're whores.
> Jayne: I'm in. . . . ("Heart of Gold" 1.13)

After they arrive, Jayne asks, "Can I start getting sexed already?" Jayne will get paid—he is not doing this for the positive liberty of others. All the others consent to go because, as Book explains, the benefit will be for others. As stated earlier, a libertarian could explain this scenario: it may just be that they enjoy helping others or risking their lives (though most of the crew certainly does not fit under the latter description). Though there is a possible libertarian explanation, it certainly is not the best way to present libertarian values. Instead, this crew—including Mal, and only excluding Jayne—clearly cares about helping promote the positive liberty of others, even when that requires their own risk and sacrifice.

[42] Mal does sleep with Nandi, the former Companion who is now the prostitutes' madam, but their sexual encounter appears to be more about mutual attraction than payment for services. It is also, though, an occasion to remember the various inadequacies that highlight the relation between Mal and Inara, who privately weeps when she learns that Mal and Nandi had sex. While Mal may be a surface-level libertarian and a deep-down anarchist, he is a significantly flawed character, as represented both by his inability to fully cognize his deeper moral character and his inability to treat Inara in a fully respectful manner. Among other problems, Mal repeatedly disrespects his consensual agreements made with Inara, such as by entering her shuttle without permission. Further, he chooses to refer to her with language that he knows she despises, such as when he calls her a "whore" (even after consenting not to call her that ever again in "Out of Gas" 1.8).

[43] Through his sexist behavior, Mal is failing to live up to either libertarian or anarchist standards since he fails to act according to a consensual agreement and fails to show Inara the proper respect she is due. And while Mal's actions are complicated by his inability to articulate or accept his strong feelings for Inara, that in no way excuses his behavior. Yet it does show that Mal's mistreatment of Inara is not meant to represent the show's moral message. Just as Mal is unable to fully see himself as more of an anarchist (and instead clings to being a libertarian), Mal's sexism establishes him as a flawed lead character whose views should not straightforwardly represent the show's own views.[7]

[44] Transitioning from a flawed hero to a seemingly perfectly bad villain, Rance Burgess, it is worth wondering why Burgess is so atrocious. Certainly, we know he is rude, sexist, and willing to hurt anyone to seize his child. But notice how his main claims to villainy relate to his greedy attempt to run everything without concern for how his actions indirectly lead to the poverty of others. Nandi explains:

> And you see the way we live here. Go into town, it's the same. Some places come up rustic 'cause they ain't got more than the basics. Rance Burgess has money enough to build a city, a real community. Keeps people living like this so he can play cowboy—be the one with the best toys. Turn this moon into a gorram theme park. ("Heart of Gold" 1.13)

Notice in Nandi's explanation, Rance's main crime appears to be that he has taken libertarian values too far: he has all this money that he uses to buy useless toys, instead of helping the impoverished people around him. Nandi's complaint about Rance comes down to the fact that he has no respect for positive liberty, and instead takes his self-ownership to mean he can do whatever he wants with his money—which of course is the libertarian position.

[45] If we are meant to trust Nandi—and her death would not be as impactful if we were not meant to—then *Firefly* is likely using her words not to support libertarianism, but to warn us of its dangers, especially at the extremes. Like "The Train Job" and "Jaynestown," "Heart of Gold" represents just one of many cases where the crew of Serenity finds themselves carrying out positive obligations in support of others' positive liberties. On numerous occasions, *Firefly* goes against the

spirit, if not the letter, of libertarianism by bringing us characters who believe it is morally incumbent on them to help others in need just because they are in need.

"People Miss out on What's Solid"—Jubal Early ("Objects in Space" 1.14)

[46] With all of this support for positive liberty on the show, it is important not to dismiss the show's critique of government. Many remember young River's response to the teacher's sycophantic rendition of the putative wonders of the Alliance: "People don't like to be meddled with. We tell them what to do, what to think. Don't run. Don't walk. We're in their homes and in their heads and we haven't the right. We're meddlesome" (*Serenity*). The show clearly has an important anti-government message (as do the movie and the comics). Governments do meddle. At this moment in history, the U.S. government, through the NSA, is reading our emails, keeping records of our phone calls, and telling us to believe that the people who alert us to these privacy invasions are the bad ones. Our government meddles. To point out that the show is not libertarian without explaining all the parts that appear to be libertarian would be insufficient.

[47] Yet even though there are elements of libertarianism in the show, these elements stand in contrast with much of the rest of the show and the rest of the Whedonverses. Fortunately, there is an alternative theory, egalitarian anarchism, that contains all the critiques of government while still being able to embrace the other characters' substantial, positive moral codes. As stated before, given Joss Whedon's strong commitment to feminism, it would be strange to judge the show almost entirely on the two most masculine characters. While Mal and Jayne are libertarians, the other characters do not seem to be.[8] Thus, it will be useful to close with one last key non-libertarian: Kaylee.

[48] Kaylee is the moral compass of this show: whatever way she points on a moral issue is probably the show's intended moral message. It may seem at times that Book is the moral compass, but he is almost too consistent on that front. There is reason to question Book's moral certitude. First, he is not everything he appears to be. He has Alliance connections ("Safe" 1.5), and Jubal Early asserts right away that he is no

preacher ("Objects in Space" 1.14). Second, he appears to get his morality from religion, which may seem artificial for an atheist writer like Whedon. Kaylee is naturally a moral person. She is not always the best judge of character, but viewers would be hard pressed to find a moment in the show where Kaylee does not care for others. Kaylee has a pureness to her that provides a peek into the show's moral heart.

[49] We know where Kaylee's heart lies: she sees goodness in Simon. Even though Simon can be mean to Kaylee, she consistently returns to him since she can see that he is a good person who would sacrifice himself whenever necessary to help others. Further, in "The Message" (1.12), Kaylee cares about another character, Private Tracey Smith, who betrays his own consent. Smith does it for what would be horrible reasons for a libertarian: someone has offered him more money to break his previous consent for the organs he is transporting inside his body. His reason for needing more money is not personal greed, but because Tracey "could get my folks off that rock they've been forced to live on, set them up some place better, some place warm" ("The Message" 1.12). So his parents are in a bad situation, and Tracey feels he can retract his consent to help them.

[50] How does Kaylee respond? "That's real nice," she says ("The Message" 1.12). Kaylee genuinely means it. She immediately likes Tracey. She may be wrong about him (he ends up blowing the whole mission because he does not trust the Serenity crew), but she agrees with the point he makes. Kaylee supports the idea that you should sacrifice the value of consent when it comes to the value of helping your parents. Kaylee's morality clearly supports positive liberty claims.

[51] When you take Kaylee's morality and Mal's hatred of the government's interferences with freedom, you get egalitarian anarchism. None of this means that Joss Whedon is an anarchist, or has even heard of "anarchism." As mentioned, this paper has only considered two main interpretations and has left open the possibility that there is no single interpretation that explains the whole show. But Whedon surely does believe in taking on the powers that be—whether they turn out to be governments, corporations, councils, law firms, or whatever—and he certainly seems to have faith that good people will replace oppressive systems with something morally superior. And that is pretty anarchist.

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Notes

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[2] J. Douglas Rabb and J. Michael Richardson have argued that "Jayne is really a parody of [Ayn} Rand's egoistic heroes" (199).

[3] For progressive (and far from libertarian) interpretations of *Buffy* see: Clark and Miller; McClelland. For a Marxist (and incredibly not libertarian) interpretation of *Dollhouse*, see Connelly and Rees. For a progressive (and not libertarian) interpretation of *Dr. Horrible*, see Buckman.

[4] For more progressive (and not libertarian) interpretations of *Firefly*, see: Lackey; Jencson.

[5] It is important to note that "right libertarianism" is a bit of a misleading name since right libertarians would share social and cultural views with both left libertarians and the standard United States political designation of "leftist." The directional distinction mainly refers to economic differences.

[6] For a fascinating fictional account of how a society without property could work, see Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*.

[7] I want to thank an anonymous reviewer from this journal for pointing out the importance of responding to the sexism in the show (as well as other bigotries). Anarchists, in being committed to equality, need to take strong stances against bigotry of any form. Of course, this theoretical entailment does not mean that an anarchist show would have only egalitarian characters, or that the writers and producers would not fall prey to their own biases (as many historically important anarchists do as well). For example, though Inara has a female client in "War Stories" (1.10), there is no sustained attempt to deal with LGBTQ issues in *Firefly*. Racial issues in *Firefly* are much more complex and require a more serious treatment than can be given here.

[8] A few sources point to Inara's prostitution as evidence for libertarianism: Sanchez; Hinson; Goldsmith (61). In spite of this view, it is important to note that Inara enjoys the success she does as a member of a *guild*, which suggests support for exactly the kind of society anarcho-syndicalists envision.