

When Ontologies Collide: The Essential Confusion of Existence

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Abstract

The fundamental issues in *BtVS* are ontological but with even a rudimentary investigation into the nature of the characters existence moral and social conundrums of such complexity are revealed which compel us to accept that we are not dealing with the simple run-of-the-mill dichotomies of physical and mental, moral and immoral, living and dead. At its simplest *BtVS* is about the living pitting their wits, strength and ingenuity against the non-living. But the categories of living and non-living are indistinct and the other entities that inhabit the Buffyverse constitute a rich array of the dead – a state that Buffy experiences twice and her mother, Joyce, once, returning briefly as a zombie – artefacts like the buffybot and Warren’s ‘girlfriend’ April, artificial life forms like Adam, the non-living or ‘undead’ of which the most obvious examples are vampires, the ‘undead’ who have regained their souls and who now seem very much alive, even to the extent of being cursed by sympathy for others and conscience, a hell-god, Glory, who spends at least part of her time as the mortal medic, Ben, and finally the living in their multifarious forms. My intention is to investigate the nature of only some of the numerous kinds of being and beings that exist in *BtVS* to show how their inevitable collision of desires and determination provides a confusion over the very nature of essence and what we consider essential for existence as an autonomous agent.

Introduction

[1] As Hamlet says most tellingly:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
[*Hamlet*, Act I, Scene V, Lines 166-7]

[2] In what follows I will examine a subset of these ‘things’. It will be a *BtVS* subset examined from an ontological and metaphysical perspective in an attempt to reveal the relations in which they stand to the criteria that are necessary for the sort of autonomous agency we associate with human being. The questions we must ask are: What kinds of being and beings co-exist in harmony – and disharmony – in this world¹, and why it is inevitable that, given the diversity of being, our narrow conceptual dichotomies collapse and we are left with a world in which what is essential for autonomous agency has become opaque.

[3] We will begin by examining what is meant by ‘ontology’ and in what way an examination of this sort can be used to greatest advantage in this context.

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¹We might observe in the harmony / disharmony notion an echo of the dynamic nature of Buffy’s relationship with Harmony.

Ontology and Ontologies

[4] Ontology is described by Barry Smith as

The study of being in so far as this is shared in common by all entities, both material and immaterial. It deals with the most general properties of beings in all their different varieties. ... Formal ontology would deal also with the different formal structures manifested by entire regions of being. To each such formal structure there would then correspond in principle a number of alternative material realizations, each having its own specific material or regional ontology. [1995, p.373-4]

[5] And Leibniz says, translated by Louis Couturat, that ontology is

... the science of something and of nothing, of being and not-being, of the thing and the mode of the thing, of substance and accident". [1903 p.512]

[6] There seems to be no richer example of ‘something and nothing’, ‘of being and not-being’, and ‘of beings in all their different varieties’ than *BtVS* and, even if it turns out to be some kind of *res ficta*, as is suggested in *Normal Again* [Season 6, Episode 117] with some very early presaging from Ted in Season 2 [Episode 23]

Ted: Or what? (stands up and steps toward her) You’ll slay me? I’m real. I’m not some goblin you made up in your little diary. Psychiatrists have a word for something like this: delusional. So, from now on, you’ll do what I say, when I say, or I show this (holds up her diary) to your mother, and you’ll spend your best dating years behind the wall of a mental institution.

it provides us with a stimulating context in which to examine the nature of social and, possibly, moral existence, and questions of identity, autonomy and agency.

Monsters, Mutants, Agency and Threat

[7] With a couple of notable exceptions, of which Xander is the most immediately apparent, the significant players in *BtVS* are either monsters or mutants and, since monsters were invented to demonstrate the terrors that might befall us if we do not conform to moral and / or social expectations – from a combination of *moneo*, to warn, and *monstro*, to show – they afford us the opportunity to examine our own nature and identity as human being more thoroughly. Francis Bacon, writing in the seventeenth century, makes exactly this point when he recommends the collection and description of

... all the monsters and prodigious products of nature, of every novelty, rarity and abnormality. [Bacon 2000]

[8] The categorization and understanding of objects and entities in our world depends on being able to make fundamental distinctions between animate and inanimate, mental and non-mental, and living and dead. Our grasp of our world is not based loosely on these pairs, it unfolds and matures because we can make these distinctions in this particular order as we develop from neonate, to infant, to child and on to adulthood. [Warrington and Shallice 1984; and Humphreys, Riddoch, and Quinlan 1989] These categories do not map onto one another smoothly though there is, at least, one combination that will cause neither us, nor the Scooby Gang, any concern: the inanimate, non-mental, dead things, that is, those things that have stayed dead when dead, and those things that have never been alive and are

not currently being wielded, as though they have a will, by some external force.² But at this juncture things become complicated.

[9] No inanimate object has a mind – it has no need for one since it is neither predator nor prey – though, exceptionally, we might accept someone in a coma as inanimate but mental, and the most notable example in *BtVS* is Faith who is unconscious for eight months, only coming around in *This Year's Girl* [Season 4, Episode 71], to wreak havoc by switching the current part of her conscious mind, though not her entire personal identity, with Buffy's. [Episode 72 *Who Are You.*] But more of this later. Some animate things are not alive; we might think here of Ted [Season 2, Episode 23 *Ted*], Warren's girlfriend April [Season 5, Episode 93 *I Was Made To Love You*], Spike's Buffybot [Series 5 Episode 96 *Intervention*] or, even more straightforwardly, vampires. Some animate things are no longer alive³, for example, the zombies in *Dead Man's Party & The Zeppo* [Season 3, Episodes 36 & 47] and, temporarily, we are led to believe, Joyce in *Forever* [Season 5, Episode 95]; and though most zombies are substantial, some are not, for example, the ghost-zombies in *Lessons* [Season 7, Episode 123].

[10] However, the greatest threat for Sunnydale comes, not from the simple and will-less 'undead' or run-of-the-mill, cannon fodder vampires, but from those things that are animate and mental. It is these things that have strategic intelligence and social intelligence. It is these things that have autonomous agency.

Being and Being As An Autonomous Agent

[11] There are, at least, three questions that should be asked in relation to the existence of anything:

1. That *X* is, that is, whether it exists or not
2. What *X* is, that is, what predicates it possesses and how it is picked out
3. How *X* is, that is, its engagement with the world⁴

We will concentrate on the third question and what a character's engagement with its world discloses about its identity.

[12] An autonomous agent is one that acts rather than simply moves and, whilst the movement of all organisms can be explained in terms of simple, deterministic motion, the actions of human beings are generally thought not to be determined by a pre-set program or set of antecedent conditions; they are felt to be, freely chosen and purposive within a dynamic environment. [Meijnsing 2000] Agents are, then, 'subjects of experience' [Strawson 1999, p 124] with a 'causal character . . . that can undergo things and do things' [Strawson 1997, p 412], acting, reacting and interacting within their world influenced by their own goal-directed, intentional mental states. [Stuart 2002]

[13] We might think that the most obvious members of the set of autonomous agents would be the human beings, Buffy, Willow, Xander, Giles and Joyce, but only Xander and Joyce⁵ are really free in

²One perplexing and inconsistent case here might be Sid the puppet from *The Puppet Show* [Season 1, Episode 9]. He claims that he was human, was cursed and became a puppet, and is now being controlled by a demon. When the demon is killed Sid returns to his cursed state of being a puppet and not to being human. Sid would, under some circumstances, satisfy the criteria of being an object being wielded by an external force and appearing as though it has a mind, but in explaining its circumstances to the Scooby Gang it would also seem to have a mind and, thus, not be entirely controlled by the demon. I will leave Sid in this footnote for the duration of this paper.

³I hesitate here in using the more usual expression 'undead' because there is no comparable category of thing outside *BtVS*. However, it is possible to have things that were once alive and are now simply reanimated, and an example would be the legs of an unfortunate frog in a biology dissection class!

⁴It might be said that there is a fourth question, 'Why *X* is?' but this question is a metaphysical one that is beyond the scope of this current enquiry and may, in fact, be beyond the scope of any enquiry.

⁵Joyce is free to act until her actions are physically determined by her tumour, but in some ways she is also a special case because her full and free interaction with the others is limited by her lack of knowledge of the relevant circumstances.

their actions.⁶ Buffy is the chosen one whose existence and actions are predetermined, and she has been resurrected as a saviour; she is no ordinary human being. Giles is her watcher, constitutionally, and in terms of his job description, unable to choose to walk away. And Willow is, as her wiccan skills improve, increasingly controlled by her power, even to the extent of being revealed as having a terrifyingly addictive personality. [See, for example, Episodes 106, 110 and 120, *All the Way, Wrecked* and *Villains*.] It is Xander who is archetypically human and humane, able to observe others and to demonstrate his understanding of, and concern for, how they feel. He notices others in a way that we are repeatedly shown others failing to do, and this is made most movingly evident in Episode 134 *Potential* when he comforts Dawn, who has to accept that she is not a proto-slayer after all, and that really she is just human like him. Alongside Xander's social intelligence – his insights into how others are feeling – there is his maturing reflective ability, the best example of which is his acute awareness of the pain that he will cause Anya by not going through with their marriage [Episode 116 *Hell's Bells*]. Mind you, with all his reflective ability, it seems an odd thing to do to a vengeance demon, even an ex-vengeance demon. Xander is a human being, Dawn has become a human being, neither has special powers, neither is mutant or monster, both act, react and interact with their worlds, and – though it is not without exception – usually unconstrained by magic or someone else's will.

[14] Anya was human but became a vengeance demon; then she became human again, and then a vengeance demon again; and, finally, because her heart wasn't in it, she became human once more. Anya struggles inelegantly with humanity and the awkwardness of social constraints which she cannot fathom. But she also struggles with, as a now mortal being, the inevitability of aging and of death. Her anxiety and shock at Joyce's death mirroring so much of what everyone is thinking but no-one is saying.

ANYA: (crying) I don't understand how this all happens. How we go through this. I mean, I knew her, and then she's, (sniffing) there's just a body, and I don't understand why she just can't get back in it and not be dead anymore. It's stupid. It's mortal and stupid. (still teary) And, and Xander's crying and not talking, and, and I was having fruit punch, and I thought, well, Joyce will never have any more fruit punch ever, and she'll never have eggs, or yawn or brush her hair, not ever, and no one will explain to me why. [Episode 94, *The Body*]

[15] Together Xander and Anya embody and express the very Heideggerian distinction between human and non-human being, of *Dasein* and *non-Dasein* [Heidegger 1962], and in being human they emphasise the notions of temporality, care, responsibility, conscience, angst and death; all of which is revealed because they are so achingly social and vocal, unlike Buffy, Willow and Giles. Interestingly, Dawn's 'becoming' human, and her growing awareness of the necessary temporality of experience, of the significance of others, of our responsibilities to them, that causing them harm harms us, and that our actions are constrained by our concern for others, is stressed by her adolescent disregard for them. Death is not inevitable to an adolescent, not even to the adolescent sister of the slayer, it is something that dawns – pun intended – only with experience and age. And, with that experience and age we become adaptable, dealing with an ever-changing environment where we, and those with whom we interact, know we have limitations. This is what social intelligence is all about, knowing when to push and when to stop; something Glory is constitutionally incapable of understanding, even when trapped, from time to time, in the mortal frame of Ben.

[16] If we simply cut to the chase, Glory's problem is that she is a hell-God with the weakness of not being adaptable, and to survive in a dynamic environment, and Glory's is more dynamic than most, you need to know your limitations and adapt quickly and appropriately. Dawn is adaptable, Glory is not. Dawn had limitations and discovered through experience what they were and how to compensate for them. As a hell-God Glory had no conceivable limitations and, even though she is occasionally subsumed by Ben – a man who, in responding to his concern for others, has become a doctor, and who feels immense guilt when his memories begin to merge with Glory's and he experiences the suffering she has caused – she is unable to recall any of his experiences and learn from them.

⁶We will assume, for the sake of argument, that human beings are not determined by some physical or non-physical causality.

[17] We get a sense of her vulnerability when she experiences physical pain for the first time:

GLORY: Okay, first thought, just totally spontaneous, unfiltered, off the top of my head ... ow!

She shakes the chain in Dawn's face, then tosses it aside.

GLORY: You hit Ben in his soft human head, and I remember the pain.
[Episode 99, *The Weight of the World*]

[18] But when the divide between Glory and Ben continues to weaken her problems multiply, care and compassion seep through as she finds herself attempting to pacify Dawn:

GLORY: I'm just thinking, here I am trying to make you feel better, when comforting others ... not part of my life. (frowns) And I'm doing it, so I can stop ... feeling so ... (pats her chest) um ... [Ibid.]

But, the pain of her conscience and guilt only increases and now she wants to rid herself of its cause, Ben:

GLORY: (crying) Ben! The human meat-sack who's infecting me. (turns to lean against the wall) Do your mojo, make an incision, or removal, or whatever you've gotta do. (sniffles) Help me! (pacing) I'm ... I'm thinking Ben's thoughts, and ... and I'm feeling his feelings! And ... uh! I... [Ibid.]

[19] The point is that, as human beings, we are not just meat-sacks, for as meat-sacks we would be unaware of others, not just unfeeling and unconcerned about our relationships with them. We would be animate, unperceiving, mindless things, will-less, purposeless, goal-less, zombies. If that had been all Ben was, then Glory would have experienced no problem. In fact, if Glory had occasionally morphed into April, the Buffybot or, even, into Ted, then she would not have experienced the pain of limited, mortal, human being; but then, that would have failed to serve the limiting or constraining purpose the other hell-Gods had in mind.

[20] The constraint for a demon is feeling, that is, in possessing a conscience. Giles may say that:

A vampire isn't a person at all. It may have the movements, the, the memories, even the personality of the person that it took over, but i-it's still a demon at the core, there is no halfway. [Episode 7, *Angel*]

... but there is a halfway, the personality does persist. Angel's personality does not go through some incredible transformation when he becomes a vampire; he continues to enjoy inflicting pain, for example, killing his family and driving Drusilla insane. It is only when his soul is restored – by a leader of the Kalderash Clan – and he is cursed with a conscience, seeing and reliving all the cruelty he has brought about, that we see some change in his actions. But this is not his choice, this has been forced upon him, and when Jenny Calendar attempts to gather the apparatus to restore his soul he brutally snaps her neck and adds 'Ah... I never get tired of doing that.' [Episode 29, *Passion*] We might want to argue that Angel's conscience acts like Spike's controlling chip, but in Spike's case he really is more *humane* than vampire and, as Lydia Chalmers writes in Chapter 10 [*Biography Before Death (speculative)*] of her *Thesis on William the Bloody*,

Only a person who loved deeply ... might have a chance of having that quality remain in any degree after becoming a vampire.

[21] Spike is, both before and after his being sired, love-sick, tender-hearted, sensitive, and incurably romantic. He has been devoted to Cecily, to Drusilla, to his mother, and now to Buffy, each of whom rejects him in some way. Yet, he continues to react thoughtfully and responsively to those he cares about who are in pain or danger. He comforts Buffy in *Fool for Love* [Episode 85] when, although he wants to shoot her, he unexpectedly finds her tearful and vulnerable at her mother's having had to go into hospital for a brain scan; and he protects Dawn from Glory in *Intervention* [Episode 96] even though it means Glory beats him to a pulp. He is acting in this way because he cares for Dawn but also because he cares for Buffy and he knows that Dawn's being harmed will cause Buffy pain. Thus, he alters his behaviour easily when circumstances around him change. Indeed his mixture of passion and adaptability are most charmingly expressed by Victoria Spah [2002] when she writes:

... the development of Spike's passion for Buffy during season 5 has illustrated that the love that has possessed him truly is "grand" in the sense that it has transformed him into something better than he was before. The metamorphosis that Spike undergoes and the stages of that process bear a striking resemblance to the set of medieval romantic conventions commonly referred to as Courtly Love.

[22] From Spike's example it seems clear that once we are not simply reacting to basic desires, for example, for food and a mate, or in a Spike's case for blood and a bit of idle fun, once we are not simply automata, other things begin to matter. We have desires and concerns. There is much to discover and much to rue, for once cursed with a soul and able to think beyond the immediate, we become all too quickly aware that others have minds, that we care for them, and that their being hurt hurts us; the essentially human notions of temporality, care, responsibility, conscience, angst and death become aspects of our consciousness, our interaction with others and the maturation of our identity. Our autonomy and our agency are limited by our anxiety and our compassion, two essentially human characteristics that Xander manifests in abundance, but maybe that is what autonomous agency is, realising that our constraints are part of our being and learning to act in harmony with them.

Conclusion

[23] The collision of ontologies in *BtVS*, that is, the dazzling array of existence and existences, provides a confusion over the very nature of what is essential for existence. A soul is not necessary for existence, nor even is life itself, but if we consider the criteria carefully, we discover that for human existence the essentials are adaptability, reflection, and the realization that all being, even hell-God being, has limitations, and that it is learning to act in accordance with these limitations that provides us with true autonomy; the kind we see most naturally present in Xander and struggling to appear, against his lower nature, in Spike.

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