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The Evolution of Joss Whedon's Vampire Mythology and the Ontology of the Soul

(1) While writers of modern vampire tales frequently discard many elements of traditional folklore for the purposes of their narratives, Joss Whedon has shown a remarkably consistent reluctance to follow a similar course in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel.*[1] Some critics have suggested, however, that Whedon's particular use and adaptation of vampire folklore results in an irreconcilable contradiction between two distinct but simultaneously held concepts of the soul (see Abbott "Walking the Fine Line" 2-4; Wilcox 15). On the one hand, Whedon, a self-described existentialist with Sartrean leanings (Whedon, "Commentary for 'Objects in Space'"), advances an understanding of the soul as a metaphor for individual moral agency; on the other he fosters a more traditional concept of the soul as the reified and ontological seat of individual identity and conscience. This latter trope, heavily influenced by religious and folkloric antecedents, forms a psychological framework from which entire season arcs depend and leads to a more serious problem that has been frequently commented upon in the literature (see for example DeKelb-Rittenhouse 148 and Sakal 242-243): specifically, how is it possible for one to hold the ensouled Angel (and later the ensouled Spike) reasonably accountable for their crimes as vampires when *prima facie* such creatures, according to the Whedonverse vampire mythology, are beings without souls, without consciences, possessed by demons, and who moreover retain no connection with the absent soul of the host body's former identity?[2]

(2) Whedon might have solved this problem quite simply by minimizing the ontological mythology of the soul set forth in the earliest seasons of *BtVS* with an alternate existential elaboration of the soul strictly as a metaphor for election between good and evil actions. This way a tacit connection between the identity of the "possessed" human and the "demon" vampire—and a marrying of their wills—would have been more readily credible as a context in which Angel might meaningfully seek redemption for Angelus' past crimes. After all, Whedon does just this with the crucifix and other sacramental apotropaics—quietly deemphasizing their importance over the life of the two series without making any overt statement concerning their *de facto* diminishing efficacy.[3] That he did not follow this course when evolving his vampire mythology and the concept of the human soul over the course of the series suggests that he saw some value in maintaining the tension between the ontological and the existential. At the same time, Whedon has also been widely praised for presenting a fictive universe where moral ambiguity is wrestled with in an authentically nuanced environment tinged with "grey." As this paper will argue, the ongoing tension between the ontological and the existential—the soul reified and the soul as metaphor for moral choice—that Whedon consistently maintains throughout the whole of *BtVS* and its spin-off

Angel, far from detracting from the verisimilitude of the series, contributes to the much vaunted and provocative ambiguity that has been one of the Whedonverse's most commented upon and defining features.

(3) In order to understand how Whedon, an atheist and an existentialist, might have arrived at an ontological mythology of the soul in the first place, it will be helpful to consider very briefly the philosophical and theological underpinnings of the traditional (and still popular) understanding of the soul in the West as well as the manner in which such doctrines affected the subsequent development of vampire folklore in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe. The way in which Whedon adopted and adapted that folklore initially, and how he evolved that mythology over the life-span of the series, will also be considered by making a careful comparison of the way Whedon variously permitted both ontological and existential emphases in the first season of *BtVS*, where the mythology is initially established, and the final season of *Angel*, where it reaches its final expression among a cast that includes two ensouled vampires as well as a third soulless demon who gives many evidences of having integrated herself into a social and moral environment conditioned largely by human values. Throughout it will be observed that Whedon and his writers allow the viewer's understanding to swing like a pendulum between the ontological and existential views of the soul without ever wholly discounting either.

(4) The concept of the soul finds its most primitive written roots in religious and mythopoeic texts such as the Sanskrit *Rig Veda*, the Sumerian *Descent of Inanna into Hell* and Homer's *Iliad*. The earliest Greek philosophers understood the soul to be a cosmological agent by which all things, including the sun and moon, moved (see Green and Groff 17*ff*; see also Aristotle 403b). It wasn't until Aristotle, however, that a clear and systematic elaboration of this doctrine emerged in a single work with respect to human beings. In his much-studied treatise *On the Soul,* Aristotle extends the notions of his philosophical predecessors by arguing that the individual human soul lends the body its capacity for life by serving as its animating force. Among a number of metaphors to illustrate this point Aristotle suggests that the body is to the physical eye as the soul is to the eye's ability to see. In this way Aristotle understood the human soul to be inseparable from the body: a body without a soul isn't an active body (Greek *soma*) at all but merely a lifeless corpse (Greek *nekros*).[4] Similarly, the soul without the body is as unthinkable a proposition as vision is without an eye. Though *not* understood as the seat of individual personality, the soul for Aristotle is the body's indispensable animating force without which the it cannot live or move.

(5) For the doctrine common among today's major monotheistic faiths that the soul is an immortal spirit inhabiting the body and lending it intelligence, will, and personality, one must turn to the discursive but influential writings of Plato. In addition to functioning as the body's animating life force, the soul is, as Plato described it, in command of the

body (*Georgias* 493a), the seat of all knowledge (*Meno* 86a), and an immortal spirit separate from the body (*Meno* 86b). By locating within the soul both the life-force of the body and human knowledge, Plato is the first to set forth a doctrine that allows for personal immortality in a separable soul with memories intact. This marks an enormous and important distinction from both Aristotle's assertion that a soul without a body is unthinkable and Homer's depiction of souls as imbecilic shadows divorced from their previous lives and memories (see Green and Groff 50*ff*; *Iliad* XXIII). Plato's thought was adopted and adapted by some of the earliest Christian apologists and had enormous influence on the subsequent development of the Christian doctrine of the human soul, primarily through the writings of St. Augustine (MacDonald 143*ff*.). From there the concept of the soul as an immortal spirit animating the body as the seat of human will, intelligence, and conscience, has pervaded every corner of Western philosophy and culture.[5]

(6) In many instances vampire folklore, albeit often unconsciously and haphazardly, is an extension of these philosophies and doctrines. Because the soul is identified so consistently in Western philosophy with the capacity for agency, it is not surprising that some of the earliest vampire folklore recounts revenants who are not soulless bodies but bodiless souls—that is, ghosts—who return from the dead to torment their victims.[6] The practice of exhuming bodies in Serbia and Walachia in what are sometimes referred to as the eighteenth century's European "vampire epidemics" (see Barber 5*ff*.; Senn 39), together with the advent of Enlightenment materialism, however, shifted the onus of blame away from the soul of the deceased and onto the corpse. Indeed, in some traditions the vampire corpse was believed to function entirely without a soul. George MacDonald, writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, observes for example that "[. . .] a vampire was a body retaining a kind of animal life after the soul had departed. If any relation existed between it and the vanished ghost, it was only sufficient to make it restless in its grave" (MacDonald, "Cruel Painter" 185). This, coupled with a folkloric belief in many cultures that one's reflection is an image of one's soul (see Barber 179), gave rise to the notion that vampires, because they lack souls, similarly lack reflections. Whedon follows this tradition in several ways by depriving his vampires both of reflections and of breath ("Out of Mind, Out of Sight," B1011; "Prophecy Girl," B1012; "Lovers Walk," B3008; "Ground State," A4020, etc.)—even and perhaps mistakenly in the case of the ensouled vampires Angel and later Spike.

(7) Other branches of vampire folklore, however, are more generally compatible with the Aristotelian proposition that the soul represents both an indispensable capacity for agency and functions as the animating force behind the body's movements. The word animation itself derives from the Latin *anima.* "soul," as well as denoting other functions attributed to it by the early Greek philosophers including life and breath. In this branch of vampire folklore there remained an acknowledged need to explain how vampire bodies could continue to function and move after death in the

absence of a soul. A second soul, an animating principle that would lend the body a capacity for movement and agency, was therefore posited. This "second soul" might be either a second human soul, a returned soul, or a demon soul infused into the corpse by the Devil:

> It is extremely common, worldwide, for postmortem functioning to be explained as the action of a second "soul." One soul departs at death, but another remains in the corpse, animating it for a time, until it too departs or simply dies. "These [vampires] have two souls," according to a Silesian source, "of which only the one dies and the second remains in the corpse" This soul, whether it is viewed as the original soul returned after death or a second soul, typically departs when the body is completely decayed. When the body is no longer functioning—no longer changing shape and color or emitting an odor—it is assumed that its animating principle has departed and can no longer do unkind things to the living [. . .] Sometimes an outside agency, not the body itself, brings the corpse to life. In Hungary, evil souls may creep in; in Slavic folklore, the vampire may be created by the Devil. (Barber 191)

(8) This branch of vampire folklore seems to have served as the inspiration for Whedon's vampire mythology as it is expressed in the teachings of the Watchers' Council. Taking this folklore and the philosophy upon which it is based as a context, what more can be said about the soul in the Whedonverse? Ontologically, what *is* it? Existentially, what *function* does it serve? And in what relation does it stand to vampires? Amid a visually astonishing kaleidoscope of antagonists that pass across the screen in the first episode of *BtVS*'s final season, the First Evil, in the guise of the late Mayor Richard Wilkins, taunts Spike for his inability to grasp the nature and significance of his own soul:

> So what'd you think? You'd get your soul back and everything'd be Jim Dandy? Soul's slipperyier than a greased weasel. Why do you think I sold mine? (laughs) Well, you probably thought that you'd be your own man, and I respect that, but . . . ("Lessons," B7001)

(9) In order to make sense of these taunts a number of assumptions must be made. First, the soul must be understood as a *thing*: something reified that can be possessed, owned, and even sold. Here Whedon echoes a tradition that extends back to Plato through vampire folklore: the soul is a distinct entity that is separable from the body. Second, it is also connected to one's identity—another Platonic concept—or else there would be no way to understand the phrase "you'd be your own man." It is the

adoption of these Platonic concepts—the human soul as a separable object and as the reified seat of human identity, together with the Aristotelian need to animate the body with a second soul as echoed in Hungarian vampire folklore—that leads to the difficulty of reasonably imputing to ensouled Angel and Spike moral responsibility for their vampires actions. In the Whedonverse vampires are not only creatures without souls but creatures who cannot be identified with the human being whose bodies they demonically inhabit. Whedon imputes to vampires evil or demonic souls because a body lacking a soul, good or evil, is not "undead" but simply dead and wholly lacking the ability to assume any agency. Giles is at great pains to make the demonic identity of vampires clear to Buffy, Willow, and Xander on various occasions in the early episodes of the first season. He says:

> The books tell that the last Demon to leave this reality fed off a human, mixed their blood. He was a human form possessed—infected—by the Demon's soul. He bit another, and another . . . and so they walk the earth, feeding. Killing some, mixing their blood with others to make more of their kind. ("The Harvest," B1002)

Later in the same episode in which Xander continues to impute some of Jesse's identity to Vamp Jesse, Giles's censure is swift and harsh: "Now you listen to me. Jesse is dead. You have to remember that when you see him you're not looking at your friend. You're looking at the thing that killed him" ("The Harvest," B1002). By the second season, Buffy, a good student of her Watcher, propounds unflinchingly the same doctrine: in "Lie to Me" (B2007) Buffy's former heartthrob Ford, who is terminally ill, attempts to make arrangements with Spike to be turned into a vampire so he can be "immortal" and thereby escape his impending death. But Buffy's rebuke is fierce: "I got a newsflash, brain-trust. That's not how it works. You die. And a demon sets up shop in your old house. It walks and talks and remembers your life, but it's not you." The philosophy behind this statement, again, is clearly Platonic: the soul, together with the human's identity and conscience, has fled, leaving the body vacant and habitable by a second evil soul or demon.

(10) The key phrase that defines the Watcher understanding of vampires is "a human form possessed." The memories and personality Giles alludes to above, properties of the soul according to Plato, are presumably mimicked by the demon and not inherited in keeping with the formula that "It walks and talks and remembers your life but *it's not you*" (italics mine). The Watcher understanding of the soul, therefore, is primarily ontological. The soul is a *thing* that can be present or absent in a given body. The lack of a human soul in a vampire body renders that individual less than or at least different from a person. The presence of a soul, on the other hand, carries the potentiality for personhood. By the

time Xander solicits Angel's help for Buffy against the Master in the final episode of the first season, his belief in an ontological difference between vampires and "persons" is quite clear:

> I don't like you. At the end of the day I pretty much think you're a vampire. But Buffy, man, she's got a big ol' yen for you. I don't get it. She thinks you're a real person. Right now I need you to prove her right. ("Prophecy Girl," B1012)

Angel himself acknowledges the validity of this mythology. In an earlier episode he explains to Buffy not only his unhappy plight but also offers her the one indisputable reason why she should ascribe to him the dignity of personhood: he, unlike other vampires, has a soul:

> For a hundred years I offered an ugly death to everyone I met. And I did it with a song in my heart. And then I made an error of judgment. Fed on a girl about your age. Beautiful. Dumb as a post, but a favorite among her clan. The Romani—Gypsies. It was just before the turn of the century. The elders conjured the perfect punishment for me. They restored my soul. When you become a vampire, the demon takes your body. But it doesn't get the soul. That's gone. No conscience, no remorse. . . . it's an easy way to live. You have no idea what it's like to have done the things I've done, and to care. I haven't fed on a living human being since that day. ("Angel," B1007)[7]

In response to Buffy's Season One question about Angel, "Can a vampire ever be a good person?" ("Angel," B1007) Giles explains that "A vampire isn't a person at all. It may have the movements, the memories, even the personality of the person that it took over, but it is still a demon at the core. There is no half-way." Here then is the crux of the dilemma: if Angel was stripped of his soul, his personhood, and therefore his human identity, when he was turned into a vampire by Darla, then how can he be held accountable for the actions of the demon who "took over" or assumed command of his body during the soulless hiatus between his human life and his ensouled vampire life?[8] In order to answer this question Whedon seems to have developed, in parallel with the ontological definition, a concept of the soul as an existential metaphor for moral choice.

(11) There are numerous hints beginning as early as the first season that Whedon and his writers admitted the possibility of a much closer connection between the "possessed" human being and the subsequent vampire than the Watcher mythology, with its emphasis on the ontological,

could admit. Whedon, however, never let go of the ontological concept entirely—that vampires are soulless monsters worthy of death—perhaps for the same reason that he insisted all vampires, regardless of how "fresh," burst into dust after being staked: a soul that is purely a metaphor for choice results in the unsavory image of a teenage girl killing what in the end are not monsters in a metaphysical sense, but criminals, albeit recalcitrant ones, who remain as human as the Slayer herself: "Vampires explode into dust because [. . .] it shows that they're monsters. I didn't really want to have a high school girl killing people every week" (Whedon, "Joss Whedon on 'Angel' and 'Puppet Show'").

(12) As early on as *BtVS*'s first season episode "Angel" (B1007) we find Giles' doctrine of the human soul and its relationship to vampires edged with ambiguity. Although Darla confronts Angel several times in this episode in an effort to tempt him to resume his identity as Angelus, strangely he refrains from slaying her in spite of his stated desire to "kill them all" ("Welcome to the Hellmouth," B1001). If she is really only an irredeemable demon, why should Angel hesitate until the very end of the episode to dispatch her? Or perhaps something of her "personhood"—her human conscience, will, and identity—survive in her vampire state? Angel admits as much several years later when speaking with a pseudo-Swami who posits that Darla the human and Darla the vampire are two different beings. "No, it's still her, it's still Darla," he retorts. "It's kinda hard to explain" ("Guise Will be Guise," A2006). When, in the first season of *BtVS*, Angel bursts in on Darla as she begins to feed on Buffy's mother Joyce, remarkably he fails to attack Darla. Instead, while he himself holds Joyce's unconscious and bleeding body, there is every indication that Angel is actually wrestling with a powerful temptation to revert to his vampire ways. Had Buffy not subsequently appeared to end the internal struggle, it is not possible to say with confidence that Angel would not have fed on Joyce with his former lover turned temptress. And surely Darla herself, a very old vampire in the service of the Master, would not waste her energy tempting someone she knew was truly above it (as she continues to do, though without much success, when she returns in "Darla" (A2007). When Angel finally does slay Darla at the end of the episode, it is an action undertaken with difficulty and, in light of his previous missed opportunities to do so, with reluctance.

(13) All this leads the viewer (of both series) to conclude that the soul can also be defined existentially: Angel resists temptation not simply because he "has" a soul (this would be the ontological explanation) but rather because, existentially, he makes a deliberate moral choice. And, as the seasons of both *BtVS* and *Angel* progress, a steady stream of hints emerge to suggest that a vampire's relationship to the host body's "absent" human soul is not as simple as the Watcher mythology would have it. But that doesn't prevent Angel from repeatedly reiterating the ontological doctrine, perhaps because it carries the comfort that there is an inviolable line and difference *in being* between himself and other vampires. In this light we can recall ensouled Angel's wish to be reunited

with Darla in the year 1900 together with his utter inability to feed on the baby she proffers as a test of his resolve (A2007). His soul seems to render him ontologically incapable of reassuming his former vampire lifestyle. The mere fact that he wishes to resume that lifestyle, however, implies some continuity of identity—with and without a soul.[9] It should also be noted, however, that there are several examples of soulless vampires, including Spike, Harmony, and even Willow's vampire double, who seem to possess some potentiality (and even actuality) for good, just as certain fully-human characters such as Faith are able to function, in spite of their souls, in ways that make them almost indistinguishable from vampires. In all of these ways Whedon and his writers successfully maintain the tension between the soul as an object one possesses, the seat of memory and personality as Plato and the subsequent Christian tradition would have it, and as an existential metaphor for a particular moral orientation. When a fan asked Whedon how he defined the soul and how its presence set Angel apart from other vampires he replied that "soulless creatures can do good and souled creatures can do evil, but that the soul-free are instinctually drawn toward doing evil while those with souls tend to instinctually want to do good" (qtd. "All Things Philosophical on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*" at http://www.atpobtvs.com/vampires.html). Importantly, Whedon's definition neither dismisses the soul purely as a metaphor nor precludes one taking it, at times, as a reified organ of personality and/or moral agency.

(14) Returning to the original problem, then, we must still come to grips with the fact that in order for Angel's quest for redemption to make any sense he must bear the moral responsibility for his actions as a vampire in a context that is simultaneously existential and ontological. In the novel *The Unicorn* by Iris Murdoch, a twentieth-century writer and philosopher whose works explore the relationship between the ontological and existential, the central protagonist is a woman imputed with the act of attempting to kill her husband by pushing him over a cliff. Although her intention, memory, and degree of guilt all remain unclear, her husband, who survived the fall, retaliates by imprisoning her for years in a seaside house while he lives elsewhere. Two characters in the novel discuss her culpability:

> "[. . .] Do you think that she really did push him over?"
>
> "I don't know. Perhaps she does not know now. But there are—acts which belong to people somehow, regardless of their will."
>
> "You mean she'd feel responsible anyway? Do *you* think she pushed him over?"
>
> He paused. "Yes, perhaps. But it is not important to say so. She has claimed the act, and one has no right to take it from her." (66)

Perhaps Angel's culpability as a vampire might be understood in this mysterious fashion that seems to unite both the ontological and the existential. Although Angel's soul, in the Platonic and Christian sense, may have flown his body before it became possessed by the demon Angelus, perhaps Angel *chooses* to "own" the actions of Angelus, and those around him have "no right" to take those actions from him. Though ontologically innocent, he remains somehow existentially culpable because he chooses to be so. Culpability, in a way, becomes the existential meaning that Angel brings to the ontology of his soul (see Curry 5). It is this, in fact, that may form the kernel of the Gypsy curse. Spike, as we will see in our consideration of the final season of *Angel*, though his crimes are as great and his soul as real, is not automatically burdened with seemingly inexpugnable guilt until he also chooses to accept, even construct, his own guilt (*cf*. "Damage," A5011) The presence of a soul, then, is not alone enough to guarantee remorse. Both the presence of a soul and the existential movement of the will are necessary for remorse.

(15) Although the final season of *Angel* as a whole continues to explore the tension between ontological and existential portrayals of the human soul, it begins with an emphasis that is almost wholly existential in nature. This is perhaps not surprising since depicting the soul strictly as a metaphor for moral choice is less problematic at this point in the series because the image of a teenage girl slaying vampires is no longer perpetually before the viewer (*cf*. Whedon, "Joss Whedon on 'Angel' and 'Puppet Show'"). As Gunn remarks in the final episode of the series, "I haven't dusted nearly enough [vampires] this year" ("Not Fade Away," A5022). Instead, the malefactor vampire is largely supplanted by a range of other monsters including ghosts, werewolves, and especially Circle of the Black Thorn demons. Vampires themselves, for the most part, are portrayed as either ensouled champions (in the case of Angel and Spike) or strangely abstinent (in the case of Harmony).

(16) It is perhaps not surprising that most critics who have attempted to account for the disconnect between the Watcher mythology and the complex moral psychology of the show have tended to view Angel and Whedon's other vampires through existential lenses (see, for example, Stevenson 84-85 and Abbott, "Walking the Fine Line").[10] In a Sartrean reading of the problem, Abbott places the emphasis on individual agency and moral choice by regarding Angel and Angelus as a single identity for whom personal accountability is unavoidable. This analysis, moreover, seems especially apt when one considers Angel's "epiphany" and his subsequent abandonment of the quest for redemption through the efficacy of good deeds ("Epiphany," A2016). But interpreting this epiphany as an outright abandonment of meaning may go too far. Though such an abandonment of meaning may mesh with Whedon's professed atheism and Sartrean leanings, it fails as a hermeneutic because it takes us too far from the core mythology of the show: we are swung too far in the

direction of individual agency so that not only the antecedent folklore but also the larger supernatural context disappear entirely. On the contrary, Angel's choices continue to take place in a universe that is haunted by the numinous “Powers That Be”—and those Powers continue to exist as a supernatural rationale for choices made and action undertaken because they are “right” (*cf.* "The Cautionary Tale of Numero Cinco," A5006; "You're Welcome," A5012). Indeed, as the final season of *Angel* unwinds in what amounts to a “final statement” concerning the nature of the human soul, Whedon and his writers seem at pains to show that the reified soul, though perhaps only one part of the picture, remains an integral part of that numinous universe inhabited by Powers who, though taken lightly in some contexts, are never seriously discounted.[11] Certain of the episodes considered below, in fact, lay enormous emphasis on the soul as object and possession and thereby mark a sharp ontological difference between the ensouled and soulless variety of vampires.

(17) Notwithstanding the season arc as a whole, however, when Harmony appears as Angel’s administrative assistant in the first show of the season, Angel and several others take exception to her presence not because she is an ontologically deficient soulless creature whose moral orientation is consequently wholly evil, but because, after gaining the confidence of Angel Investigations in season two’s “Disharmony” (A2017), she led Angel and his cohorts into a vampire trap. Their censure of her is based not on *what* she is, but on the *choice* she made—their condemnation of Harmony is existential to the extent that it implies she might have been free to choose a different path in spite of her lack of a soul.

(18) What is perhaps most surprising is that Wesley, who elsewhere maintains a strict ontological view of the soul consistent with his indoctrination as a Watcher, is the one who selects Harmony out of Wolfram and Hart’s “typing pool” to be Angel’s personal assistant. It should be remembered that Wesley, among all the members of Angel Investigations, took the strongest exception to Harmony in Season Two’s “Disharmony” (A2017) by rebuking Cordelia’s hospitality in words that closely echo Giles’s first season rebuke of Xander for continuing to believe in the possibility of friendship with a former-friend-turned-vampire: “That is not your friend. That thing may have your friend’s memories, her appearances, but it’s just a filthy demon, an unholy monster” ("The Harvest," B1002). That none of this rhetoric, drawn from the Watchers’ ontological understanding of the soul, is used to object to Harmony’s fifth season role as Angel’s administrative assistant shows the extent to which, by the beginning of the series’ final season, Whedon has allowed the emphasis to shift away from that of a Platonic and Christian reified soul towards something that functions much more like a metaphor for existential agency. After all, if Harmony’s lack of a soul really did mean she was so evil that choosing good became an utter impossibility, the notion of her serving as a member of Angel’s team, however ostracized at various points, would be unthinkable.

(19) “Unleashed” (A5003) continues the existential emphasis by drawing close parallels between Angel the ensouled vampire and Nina the werewolf. Although werewolves are never castigated as soulless, it is clear that when people are changed their souls, in the Platonic sense of being the seat of memory, personality, and agency, are wholly sublimated. In fact, unlike vampires, werewolves are often unable (especially in the early stages of their lycanthropy) to remember undertaking violent actions once they return to their human form ("Wild at Heart," B4006; "Unleashed," A5003; "Smile Time," A5014). In this episode a young woman named Nina is bitten by a rare breed of werewolf and subsequently undergoes the unwelcome transformation into a werewolf herself. Angel befriends Nina and attempts to “manage” her new nature, just as Oz’s werewolf nature was managed in *BtVS*’s third season, by confining her for several nights each month when the werewolf emerges. Like Oz, however, Nina is enormously uncomfortable with what she has become. Angel attempts to comfort her by drawing analogies between her state and his own—in spite of the fact that there are clear differences. Angel, for example, can not only choose the moment of his transformation, but, even when wearing his vampire visage, he continues to maintain control over his actions in spite of the demon’s palpable presence. In the episode’s final scene, Nina asks Angel how he can live with himself knowing that he’s killed people. His response is instructive: “At some point you’ll be at the grocery store, or with Amanda, and the whole werewolf thing, it will just be a part of who you are.” By encouraging Nina simply to accept the werewolf as integral to her overall identity, Angel simultaneously implies that his demon is as much a part of him as his human soul. This is as close as Angel ever comes to overtly contradicting the Watcher mythology’s ontological doctrine that a vampire has no connection to the identity of the person whose body the demon possesses.[12] And, even if we are to admit that Angel is unique among vampires because he has a soul, there remains no necessary connection, outside his own assertion, between the demonic presence and his ensouled identity. In many episodes, moreover, Angel suggests that these two identities remain quite separate (see "The Dark Age," B2008; "Smile Time," A5014, etc.). In “Guise Will Be Guise” (A2006), for example, Angel flatly rejects the pseudo-Swami’s assertion that “the demon is you.”[13] With Nina, however, Angel places the ontological view of the soul in total eclipse by presenting himself as a single agent capable of, and accountable for, all the moral choices he has made. In this context his quest for redemption—or even his lesser quest to simply do what is right—seems at its most straightforward and credible.

(20) That Whedon cites the battle between Angel and Spike in “Destiny” (A5008) as the highlight of the final season isn’t surprising since this episode succeeds in portraying an almost perfect balance between the concepts of the soul as existential metaphor and ontological reality (Whedon, “Angel: The Final Season”). The battle itself is for title to a type of martyrdom where Spike’s and Angel’s souls function as ontological prerequisites and become, in that sense, both heavy burdens and precious

baubles. The ensouled vampire, according to the Shanshu prophecy, is set apart for a unique if unclear role in the apocalypse together with the promise of a subsequent return of humanity; their souls have the effect of making one of either Spike or Angel "better" or at least more important than other vampires (*cf.* A2017). Since the end of the series' first season, Angel has believed that the prophecy, if true, is specifically about him. Spike's sudden appearance as a second ensouled vampire champion throws that conviction into question. During the course of the dramatic battle for both immolation and ascendancy, Spike vents on Angel all his latent anger and jealousy. Though he admits that Drusilla turned him into a vampire, he accuses Angel of making him a monster, and in various flashbacks we see how Angel deprived him of both his dignity and his innocent romanticism. But the accusation itself seems to suggest that, while Spike may have lost his soul when he became a vampire, he had yet to lose something more—not just romantic pretensions but also decency and a sense of belonging to something larger than himself—by choosing to adopt the sadistic and heartless Angelus as his mentor. In an argument to prove he is more worthy of his soul than Angel, Spike further points out that his soul, unlike Angel's, was not inflicted on him against his will as a curse and penalty for past crime: he chose it and pursued it. Indeed, Spike, as a soulless vampire, made himself unique in the Whedonverse by asserting his existential prerogative to seek an ontological change in his being.

(21) Looking back to Spike's slow rehabilitation throughout several seasons of *BtVS,* we can see how this determination formed and hardened within him. The "neutering" chip implanted by The Initiative in Season Four of *Buffy* was initially important because it prevented violence against humans and thereby allowed the members of Buffy's gang to associate with Spike without fear of personal harm. This prolonged contact with humans allowed him to form strong attachments—in themselves movements of the will—especially to Dawn and Buffy. At a certain point Spike's love for Buffy became sufficient to allow him to cross some sort of moral divide so that, without a soul and eventually without a chip, he would generally, though certainly not invariably (*cf*. B6018), choose to do good. This sea change in Spike's moral orientation altered his agency to the extent that he was as likely to approach choices from a perspective that was basically good as from one that was basically evil. In light of this transformation it only seems to follow that Spike would be rewarded with a soul since he had practically begot one through sheer force of will. And, of course, at the moment he finally passes across the threshold completely, he becomes ensouled in the final episode of *BtVS*' sixth season.

(22) It must not be forgotten, however, that his choice to be ontologically changed was existential in origin. Dawn's argument for equivalency between the chip and the soul ("Crush," B5014), moreover, isn't credible in this light (*cf*. Stevenson 86). While the chip was designed to prevent evil action, Spike remained free to approach choices from the darker side of the moral divide—that is, he would still be basically evil—

but with a soul, though the end choice might appear to be the same, the direction from which moral choice was approached became wholly different. This puts one in mind of Whedon's much earlier explanation that "soulless creatures can do good and souled creatures can do evil [. . .]." In this episode, with its flashbacks and larger narrative context, Whedon seems most fully to actualize this abstraction. Spike chose to have a soul knowing that the soul enjoins good on the possessor. Though the extent to which it can be considered the essence of personality and agency—as the Watchers' Council asserts in an echo of Plato—is here less certain.

(23) Angel's eventual defeat by Spike causes him to doubt the ontological status of his own soul in "Soul Purpose" (A5010). In this episode, full of symbolism, Fred performs surgery in Angel's parasite-induced delusion and extracts from his body a remarkable and unprecedented symbolic instantiation of Angel's soul in the form of an apparently dead goldfish in a bowl. And though the images are delusional, their meaning is very real: Fred concludes, after Angel's soul has been removed, that "there's nothing left. Just a shell" (A5010)—a phrase that suggests not only Angel's will to choose good but his very identity in the Platonic sense inheres within (and is lost with) his soul. Lacking it, as this episode's teaser suggests, Angel is nothing. That the soul is more than a mere symbol, however, that it is a *thing* most probably if mysteriously connected with identity, becomes throughout this and subsequent episodes an increasingly credible supposition.

(24) In "Harm's Way" (A5009), the pendulum continues a slow swing back toward the ontological view of the soul set forth in the earliest episodes of *BtVS*. The episode's premise centers around Harmony's fear that she may have involuntarily murdered a human male after she finds, with few memories from the night before, his corpse in her bed. Her dilemma is made more acute by the fact that under Angel's tenure Wolfram and Hart has adopted a zero-tolerance policy that prohibits feeding on humans. To ensure compliance, employees are periodically subjected to random blood tests, and the punishment for non-compliance is death. Although Harmony does her best to avoid detection, it is clear that she is both terrified by the potential consequences and discombobulated by the fact that she cannot remember committing the transgression. She remains acutely aware, however, that she is fully capable of committing such a murder (even in a stupor) since, having no soul, she is naturally drawn to such crimes. In other words, her ontological deficiency has diminished her ability, if not deprived her of it altogether, to make conscious moral choices. In this way the existential is made to depend on the ontological. Culpability is uppermost in Harmony's mind as she pleads with Fred, who is performing a postmortem on the body: "And don't you think it's possible that whoever did it could have blacked out and doesn't even remember doing it, so it's totally not their fault?" Here Harmony is attempting to use as an excuse her lack of conscious agency in committing the crime. When she eventually discovers that she is innocent of the crime, her relief is at least as great as any of

those around her. And, in her peroration she reminds those around her of her ontological deficiency and the difficulty that results from it: “OK, I made some bad choices. I mean, it's not like I have a soul. I have to try a lot harder." Stated philosophically, it is harder for Harmony to make choices that are morally good because she lacks the ontological equipment: a reified soul. By the end of the season it becomes clear just how much harder it is for Harmony than for Angel and Spike. Her will, in the end (and perhaps unlike Spike’s will), isn’t sufficient on its own to effect any major change in her basic moral orientation. Nor is she alone among vampires in this as subsequent episodes show. Spike, instead, becomes the single exception that proves the rule.

(25) In “Why We Fight” (A5013) the viewer is confronted with another vampire who seems to wish, but cannot effect, a different kind of existence because he lacks a soul with which to make morally good choices. Though no firm line is drawn between the soul and human identity in this episode, it is nevertheless clear that the soul is a reified possession and that without it certain things are simply impossible. In flashbacks we meet Lawson, a young submariner who is turned into a vampire by Angel in order to save the lives of several other shipmates during World War II. In this episode Lawson seeks out Angel in present-day Los Angeles because he has become wholly unsatisfied with this vampire existence and wishes either for some remedy or, failing that, to take revenge on Angel for the emptiness and meaninglessness of his last sixty years:

> “We all need a reason to live, even if we're already dead. Mom, apple pie, the stars and stripes—that was good enough for me till I met you. Then I had this whole creature-of-the-night thing going for me—the joy of destruction and death—and I embraced it. I did all the terrible things a monster does—murdered women and children, tortured fathers and husbands just to hear 'em scream—and through it all . . . I felt nothing. Sixty years of blood drying in my throat like ashes. So what do you think? Is it me, chief? Or does everyone you sired feel this way?”

Though it is clear that Lawson wishes to return to a simpler life constructed around the wholesome abstractions of family and patriotism, that door is irretrievably closed because as a vampire he no longer has a soul. He wishes so very much to have one that the viewer can’t help but wonder if he might not be wholly beyond the hope of redemption. But here the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of the ontological to make sheer will an adequate remedy. In the dialogue that follows Angel is clear that the soul is no metaphor and that Lawson simply does not have one. Nor is there any way for him to obtain or recover one (notwithstanding Spike’s own saga in *BtVS* Season Six where the soul functioned in a fashion distinctly more existential):

ANGEL: You're the only one I ever did this to . . . after I got a soul.

LAWSON: Do I have one, too?

ANGEL: I don't think it works that way, son.

LAWSON: Didn't think so.[. . .] You gave me just enough, didn't you? Enough of your soul to keep me trapped between who I was and who I should be. I'm nothin' . . . because of you.

The implication is clear: without a soul Lawson *is*, in the ontological sense, nothing. Angel's worst fears in "Soul Purpose" (A5010) become Lawson's reality. He has no personality, or at least not the personality he would choose to have. Angel, seeing no hope for him, stakes Lawson as much to put him out of his misery as to free the world of a violent killer. Angel himself, in his own words of defense, acknowledges a very stark boundary between his soulless existence as Angelus and his ensouled life as Angel. He even implies that he may be less accountable for his actions as Angelus than he is for his actions as Angel.[14] All of this carries with it an important existential implication: the choices Angel makes with a soul, if not wholly different, at least spring from a different set of moral imperatives.

(26) In "Shells" (A5016) Whedon allows the pendulum to swing even further in the direction of the Platonic ontological soul, a *thing* not only separable from the body but also the exclusive reified essence of human identity. In this episode Fred meets with an agonizingly painful death as her body is possessed by the spirit of one of the "Old Ones" named Illyria. Angel responds by evolving a plan based on the notion that the soul is an ontological entity separable from the body. In short, he hopes to "find" Fred's soul and put it back into her body. The analogy between what appears at first to be Fred's possession and the making of vampires is obvious across a lengthy dialogue (with lacunae):

WESLEY: The infection—Illyria—consumed her. Took over her body.

GUNN: Then it's still Fred, right? This thing is just controlling . . .

WESLEY: She's gone. [. . .] I watched it gut her from the inside out. Everything she was is gone. There is nothing left but a shell.

ANGEL: Then we'll figure out a way to fill it back up.

SPIKE: The thing only took over her body. Just a tip of the theological.

ANGEL: It's the soul that matters.

SPIKE: Trust us. We're kind of experts.

Indeed, Angel's later determined remark that "Fred's soul is out there somewhere. We'll find it and we'll put if back where it belongs [. . .]" is identical in concept with the ontological view of the soul propounded by Giles in *BtVS*' first season. Angel abandons his hope only after taking it on unassailable authority that, "There's nothing left to bring back. Miss Burkle's soul was consumed by the fires of resurrection. Everything she was is gone." And although this destruction represents the most nihilistic image of death in the whole series, little more is said about it.[15] Wesley subsequently refuses Illyria's argument that human identity is "a summation of recollections" ("Origin," A5018) and that because she possesses the whole of those recollections she can simply *be* Fred. Objecting in typical Watcher fashion, Wesley asserts that humans are "more than just memories." It is, of course, necessary that Wesley reject her argument. Had he failed to do so it would also have followed that vampires would *be* the people whose bodies they possess since they inherit the totality of the human host's memories. And while the word soul isn't used expressly in this dialogue, it seems clear that Wesley is in fact talking about something apart from memory that serves as the essence of human identity. Something that, moreover, is lost when a vampire is made. His objection, then, is wholly consistent with Giles's ontological construction of the soul described in the first season of *BtVS*. The series, at this point, seems to have come full circle.

(27) In the final episode "Not Fade Away" (A5022), Angel's second season words to Cordelia that "Harmony will turn on you" ("Disharmony," A2017) prove prescient. The tension between the existential and ontological begins again to mount when Angel finally confronts Harmony who betrays the group and emerges as chronically untrustworthy:

> ANGEL: Loyalty really isn't high on your list.
>
> HARMONY: Oh, is that right? I'll have you know that I am damn loyal dumb ass.
>
> ANGEL: You betrayed me. You are betraying me now even as we are talking.
>
> HARMONY: Because you never have any confidence in me.
>
> ANGEL: No—because you have no soul.
>
> HARMONY: I would if you had confidence in me.

Angel places the blame exactly where Giles and Wesley would place it: on Harmony's ontological deficit. Her protestations about confidence strike

the ear, at this point, as so much subterfuge. Though the soul as the Platonic essence of human identity is in eclipse at this moment, its function as a reified moral organ that allows, or at the very least facilitates, certain types of choices is beyond doubt. One can almost imagine that Harmony might have wished to choose another path. But, for the same reason Angel gave Lawson, "It doesn't work that way" (A5013). The rest of Angel's team, on the other hand, are free to make choices about where they will stand in the final battle. When Angel puts it to them by asking, "You need to decide if that's worth dying for" (A5022) Spike, the ensouled vampire champion, is significantly the first to raise his hand. It is also significant that Lorne is the last and Illyria isn't present—though there are passing references to demon souls throughout the series, the status of such souls always remains unclear (see for example Stevenson 90). Even Lindsey, one of the most recalcitrant characters in the entire series, *can* choose because he has a soul. Angel has Lorne shoot Lindsey not because he cannot choose good but rather because he cannot be relied upon to do so consistently.

(28) In many ways this final season presents the viewer with a microcosm of the manner in which the soul is depicted throughout the seven seasons of *BtVS* and the five of *Angel*. At times the emphasis is almost wholly existential and the soul an abstracted metaphor. At other times, the soul functions as an organ of moral choice that facilitates good. And, at the other extreme, the soul is depicted as a Platonic object that comprises human identity and will. The Watcher mythology that dominates the first season of *BtVS* and in many ways this final season of *Angel* is most closely aligned with the last of these modes. As Whedon points out himself, however, objects can be understood in two ways: for what they are intrinsically and what their function happens to be: "I find the meaning of the object to be with the object, both in however it's functional and the fact of its existence. A ball is to be thrown, but it's also just a round thing" (Whedon, "Commentary for 'Objects in Space'"; see also Curry 4). In this light, a soul, then, is variously a metaphor or a reified organ for moral choice. That is its function. Alternatively, it is also at times portrayed as the essence of human identity, as it is in "Shells" (A5016) when the pendulum of emphasis is at its ontological apogee. To see the soul in light of Whedon's metaphysical remarks above, one might say that the metaphor of moral choice is analogous to the ball being thrown in "Objects in Space." The dimension of the ball that is simply "a round thing" might describe the soul as the seat of human identity. Finally, the soul as a reified organ of moral choice, as ontological "equipment" without which one must try so very much "harder" (A5009), might be said to fall somewhere in between.

(29) All three of these modes are variously emphasized throughout *BtVS* and *Angel* without one ever gaining final ascendancy. Nor should this be seen necessarily as a contradiction. Instead, by viewing it through various lenses the soul becomes provocative to the very extent that it remains just beyond the scope of a clear definition. In place of a sharply

articulated statement Whedon leaves us with something more amorphous—an image of a fish in a bowl that refuses to swim when watched but that might be anywhere in the water when one's eye drifts back in its direction. Iris Murdoch described the Platonic concept of the Good in a similar fashion by laying emphasis on transcendence. One need only substitute the word soul for the word good to have a close approximation of its reality—and elusiveness—in the Whedonverse:

> Good is the distant source of light, it is the unimaginable object of our desire. Our fallen nature knows only its name and its perfection. That is the idea which is vulgarized by existentialists and linguistic philosophers when they make good into a mere matter of personal choice. It cannot be defined, not because it is a function of our freedom, but because we do not know it. (Murdoch 109)

Notes

1. To name just a few instances, he consistently retains the need vampires have to be invited across domestic thresholds ("Angel," B1007; "Lie to Me," B2007; "Amends," B3010; "Pangs," B4008; "The Gift," B5022; "Him," B7006; "Disharmony," A2017; "Destiny," A5008, etc.; their lack of reflections in mirrors ("Out of Mind, Out of Sight," B1011; "Bad Eggs," B2012; "Earshot," B3018; "Darla," A2007, etc.); and their aversion to sunlight ("The Harvest," B1002; "Lovers Walk," B3008; "Into the Woods," B5010; "Bring on the Night," B7010; "City of . . .," A1001; ""Guise Will be Guise," A2006, etc.).

2. There are many instances where possessed persons are not held accountable for their actions, ranging across both series beginning with Xander's possession by a hyena spirit (B1006) and ending with Wesley's exoneration of Cordelia in *Angel*'s final season who tells her, "You didn't kill Lilah" (A5012)—and this in spite of the fact that, like vampires, both Xander and Cordelia are able to remember committing crimes when they were possessed.

3. A glimpse into Buffy's arsenal of weapons in the first season, for example, reveals wooden stakes together with crucifixes, holy water, and even communion wafers (B1002). By the seventh season objects of a strictly sacred nature are largely replaced by swords, axes, and other armaments that, while imbued with supernatural power, cannot be described as particularly religious. For more on the crucifix as a religious symbol in *BtVS* see Erickson 114-115, Stevenson 68-70, Abbott, "A Little Less Ritual" 6, and Playden 135. For an interesting counterpoint to this argument, see Stevenson 257.

4. Aristotle writes, “If the eye were a living creature, its soul would be its vision; for this is the substance of the sense of formula of the eye. But the eye is the matter of vision, and if vision fails there is no eye, except in an equivocal sense, as for instance a stone or painted eye [. . .] That which has the capacity to live is not the body which has lost its soul, but that which possesses its soul” (*On the Soul* 412b).

5. For an excellent overview of the development of the doctrine of the soul to Plotinus, see Green and Groff 151-170.

6. See for example the sixteenth-century “Shoemaker of Breslau” (Barber 10-14).

7. There are at least two subsequent instances where this final sentence is shown to be false (*cf*. A2007, A5013).

8. There is an interesting parallel between Giles’s ontological view and St. Justin’s second century critique of Gnosticism: “One of his main criticisms of Gnosticism was that it contained a strict determinism with respect to salvation. Those who have *pneuma* [a soul] are saved; those without it are not. Justin recognized, however, that without freedom there can be no moral responsibility, and without freedom the message of Jesus has no point, for it can change nothing” (Green and Groff 154). The Watcher mythology can be criticized on similar grounds.

9. It should also be remembered that Darla, immediately after Angelus kills his father, remarks that the new vampire will continue to seek—in vain—his father’s approval for a lifetime because “What we once were informs all that we have become” ("The Prodigal," A1015). Indeed, Darla consistently appeals to the existential view that there is a close connection between the host human and the vampire across the whole of both series from her earliest attempts to convince Angel to reassume his killing ways in *BtVS*’s first season to her insistence, after Wolfram and Hart resurrected her as a human, that “It’s still me” ("Dear Boy," A2005).

10. Although some critics have proposed that the vampire be viewed through a Freudian lens (see Fossey 2, Nevitt and Smith), the categories of Freud seem too black and white to support a sustained analysis, not least because no compelling explanation for the psychological transition between vampire and human is ever offered.

11. It seems to have gone unnoticed that Kierkegaard’s three spheres of existence—the esthetic, the ethical, and the religious—map onto the characters of the Whedonverse with a striking accuracy that would probably support the moral weight of the series much more easily than other frameworks because they leave room for both human agency and numinous absolutes. Angel’s killing of Drogyn to gain the trust of the Circle of the Black Thorn ("Power Play," A5021), for example, might be viewed not as an abandonment of meaning (which it clearly is not) but as

an action consistent with Kierkegaard's teleological suspension of the ethical.

12. There is also the oft-quoted instance in "Doppelgängland" (B3016) when Angel begins to object to Buffy's echoing of the Watcher mythology concerning vampires and human souls. But the difference between this and what Angel offers to Nina is the difference between a hint and a full explanation.

13. It is interesting to note that "Guise Will be Guise" (A2006) is one of only two episodes of *Angel* written (or co-written) by the prolific *BtVS* writer Jane Espenson.

14. In "Hell Bound" (A5004), Angel remarks, in his own defense when Wesley points out a few printed references to Angelus's crimes, that it's, "[. . .] not fair. I didn't even have a soul when I did that." Angel's logic here, of course, only deepens the difficulty one might have in understanding his choice to seek redemption for Angelus' crimes.

15. Illyria's final promise to Wesley, while she appears to him one last time as Fred, that upon his death he will finally "be where I am" ("Not Fade Away," A5022) is either a nihilistic statement or to be understood within the larger context of Illyria's promise to "lie" to Wesley.

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