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Richard Greene and Wayne Yuen
Why We Can't Spike Spike?: Moral Themes in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*[1]

(1) *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can be viewed as a morality play: every week, Buffy and her friends fight evil in some form and in so doing make complex moral decisions. The moral principles that underwrite Buffy's relationships with her non-human counterparts can be explained with an eye toward developing a clear picture of her overall moral system. We will test these principles for consistency and plausibility. Finally, we will explicate in some detail what we consider to be the chief pedagogical virtue of the show: that it is reflective of the complexity of the various moral dilemmas one encounters in the real world and the intuitions that tend to guide our moral decision making, and through clever use of allegory it takes well-supported stands on a number of pressing moral issues.

(2) To understand Buffy's moral system, one needs only to look at her relationships with other characters in the show. Start with Buffy's relationship with Angel (a vampire who has had his soul restored by a gypsy curse): it speaks immediately to the fact that not all vampires are evil. What makes Angel stand apart from other vampires is that he has a soul, or more specifically, that because he has a soul he has no desire to harm people (More precisely, since plenty of persons with souls do desire to harm others, perhaps the correct thing to say is that because Angel has a "good" soul he has no desire to harm people). It follows then, that Buffy slays vampires not because they are soulless or because they are vampires, but because they harm human beings.

(3) So we can summarize Buffy's first moral principle as *Do not harm those who typically do not pose a threat to human beings.* (By "typically" we mean under normal everyday circumstances. Lions, for example, under certain circumstances pose threat to human beings, but we don't want to say that they typically pose a threat to human beings. Vampires, on the other hand, do typically pose a threat to the citizens of Sunnydale). We can also, as a first approximation, take its opposite as a moral principle, viz., *One ought to stop (either by killing or by incapacitating) those who typically can or will harm other human beings*. This principle, however, stands in need of revision. In the episode "Ted," (episode 2011) Buffy kills Ted, believing him to be a human being, because he poses a direct threat to her mother and herself. Even though Ted poses a threat that is equal in severity to the threat posed by vampires (albeit the threat is different in kind), Buffy is despondent when she thinks that she has actually killed a human being, and she is subsequently relieved when she discovers that Ted is an android and not a human. Thus our

second principle becomes *One ought to stop (by killing or incapacitating) all non-humans that typically can or will harm other human beings*. Further evidence that Buffy is operating in accordance with something akin to this principle is seen in the episode in which Faith (another slayer) kills one of the human henchmen of the evil town Mayor. Despite the fact that the human poses a significant danger to humans (he is assisting the Mayor, who is attempting to become an omnipotent demon), Buffy admonishes Faith for killing a human. Moreover, Faith is unable to reconcile the fact that she, up to that point a protector of humans, has actually killed a human. This event drives Faith to become a rogue slayer in the employ of the forces of evil. Humans, therefore, have a special status in Buffy's moral system. This special status makes them exempt from being seriously harmed by her, even if they do harm others.

(4) A third moral principle comes into play when the evil vampire Spike is brought into the show as a permanent character: *Do not harm those who pose no immediate threat*. When The Initiative (a top secret branch of the U.S. Military which does research and experiments on demons and vampires) embeds a chip in Spike's head to prevent him from hurting humans, a new dynamic in the relationship between Buffy and Spike is created. There are several reasons why Buffy should eliminate Spike while he is incapacitated. First, Spike wants to kill Buffy, and should he get the chip removed he would be in a good position to do so; second, he can still harm her in a variety of ways, as illustrated when he aids Adam (an initiative-created cybernetic human-demon soldier which could not be controlled) in causing dissention among Buffy and her friends. Buffy has no reason to believe that Spike will not take advantage of any situation in which he can harm her.

(5) So why doesn't Buffy spike Spike? There appear to be three moral factors working in Spike's favor. First, in his incapacitated state, there can be no "fair" fight between him and Buffy. This factor also exemplifies another reason why Buffy does not harm humans; in general, they are not a fair match against her superior strength (although the members of the Initiative are, because of their mechanically and drug-enhanced bodies). On numerous occasions, members of Buffy's team reassure Spike that it would be wrong to harm him while he is in this state. Our heroes are operating on the general moral principle that defenseless people, animals, etc. should not be harmed. Giles summarizes this when he says, "Look, look, Spike . . . we have no intention of killing a harmless . . . uh, creature. . . . "(episode 4009) Thus the second factor that serves to protect Spike is the principle that potentially harmful agents should not be harmed provided that they can be controlled. This principle is best illustrated by the case of Oz (a werewolf who is a contributing member of Team Buffy when not in wolf form). Being a werewolf, Oz has an instinct to hurt people while he is a wolf. However, since locking him up during a full moon can largely control him, more permanent forms of control are not required. The chip in Spike's head functions as his "prison."

(6) While both factors serve to keep Spike alive, there remains a compelling reason for killing him, viz., that he still poses a threat. So one wonders why Buffy doesn't, in fact, spike Spike. The most important reason is that Spike has utility. Spike has access to information about demon and vampire activity in the area, which at times proves to be invaluable to Buffy. In return for this information, Buffy and company provide money, occasional protection from The Initiative, a place to stay, or sometimes even butcher's blood. Without this utility, given the long-term threat he poses, killing Spike would be just as permissible as killing a rabid dog that has been temporarily restrained.

(7) Buffy's relationship with Spike, however, is not always *quid pro quo*. In a number of episodes Buffy and the gang have blackmailed Spike for information, while appearing to derive a great deal of pleasure from doing so. Whereas blackmailing Spike appears to raise no moral concerns for our heroes, blackmailing humans is considered to be both intuitively morally impermissible and inconsistent with Immanuel Kant's formula of humanity: *Treat rational creatures as ends in themselves and never only as means to an end*. This further illustrates the difference in status between humans and non-humans in Buffy's moral reasonings. Thus, in addition to the principles stated above, come into play the following: 4) *No harm should be done to those who don't harm humans*; 5) *Unless there is some urgent pressing matter, fairness should be taken into account*; 6) *Those that do harm humans but can be controlled should be controlled*; 7) *When the benefits of a good opportunity outweigh the risks of a dangerous situation, the good should be attempted*.

(8) The above principles seem intuitively sound, but how applicable are they to the real world? After all, they are derived from a fictional television show about demons and vampires. Although the majority of people in the real world (perhaps all) never slay demons and vampires, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* nevertheless has pedagogical value. Through allegorical depictions of ethical situations, it reflects the complexity of the moral world in which we live.

(9) Buffy's sophisticated moral universe does not assume that difficult decisions can be made without consequences. Unlike many other television shows, decisions made in the show affect subsequent episodes, and sometimes permanently change the characters in the show; the moral universe is not simplified in order to allow appropriate decisions whose repercussions fully unfurl within an hour. Moreover, the show does not ignore competing value systems. Most notably, the Initiative's "institutional" ethics is presented, at least nominally, as a viable ethical alternative. The Initiative's ethics seem to follow the standard military ethic of avoid harming civilians and anything identified as an enemy may be eliminated or captured. In this case, it is especially easy to identify enemies, they are demons and vampires. But historically this "institutional" ethic has led to questionable activities, such as the Japanese internment during World War II. Buffy's value system is also not without flaws. No character in the show is portrayed as perfect, as each of the characters have been morally faulted at one time or another (for example when Buffy kills Ted, although only subsequently redeemed hindsight, Buffy does act questionably in causing his fall down the stairwell). And although Buffy's moral decisions tend to be the most favorably portrayed in the show, the Initiative also presents compelling arguments for some of their actions.

(10) Further evidence that *Buffy* is reflective of real-life ethical situations can be adduced from various quotidian circumstances in which the characters find themselves. A dominant conceit of the show is that Buffy is an extraordinarily (even supernaturally) gifted teenage girl who nevertheless maintains her "normal" teenage personality and concerns. Teenagers often find themselves having to weigh their moral obligations (as well as other obligations) against their desire to fit in, be cool, be accepted, feel normal. Buffy, on more than one occasion, opts to put her moral responsibilities aside in order to pursue a "normal" teenage lifestyle, often with negative consequences. Similarly, the largely ineffectual Spike, whose instincts incline toward mischief and violence, finds that he must co-exist with and occasionally even assist people he dislikes (i.e., Buffy and the "Scooby Gang," as

they mockingly refer to themselves) in order to survive. Again, the problem of working with people whose sensibilities are different from, even antithetical to, our own is part of our everyday lives. Xander must deal on a regular basis with feelings of inadequacy caused by two factors: first, he has no remarkable personal skills (he lives in his parents' basement, on occasion he must drive an ice cream truck to make money, and he is physically uncoordinated, as is evidenced by his slap-fight with the vampire, Harmony (Episode 4003)); second, those around him are not only skilled, but have supernatural abilities (Buffy is a slayer, Willow is a practicing witch, his girlfriend Anya is a recovering demon, and Oz is a bassist in a popular alternative rock band). It goes without saying that young people routinely experience insecurities like Xander's, albeit generally in less fanciful contexts.

(11) *Buffy* also explores the moral dimension of being a social animal. What does one do when one's social obligations conflict with one's occupation, or birthright as the case may be? How should a person act when he discovers that his girlfriend has been in love with a person he finds morally reprehensible? Riley Finn (Buffy's most recent boyfriend and demon-hunting member of the Initiative) struggles with this question when he discovers that Buffy had been romantically involved with the vampire Angel.

(12) In addition to the above considerations *Buffy* addresses a number of other moral issues which bear on issues that confront the real world. For example, parallels can be drawn between the moral status of demons and the moral status of animals in our society, thus raising important questions regarding animal rights. Demons are routinely treated as means to an end—roughed up for information, or used to run interference. Thus, it is clear that in Buffy's moral universe in many cases non-humans enter the moral sphere only to the extent that they have utility, and more importantly their moral status does not grant them rights and privileges (unless via some agreement to that effect). Interestingly, on this matter, Buffy *et al* are not acting in accordance with Kant's Formula of Humanity as many demons (such as Doyle, Angel's demon sidekick, and Angel himself) are rational creatures (whatever their other shortcomings may be), and not merely animals. *Buffy* also touches on the related questions of precisely what makes a person bad, and how we ought to treat those who differ from us.

(13) It may help at this point to develop a classification of various types of television programs that in one way or another present moral situations and / or depict persons as moral agents. We can imagine these programs as existing along a spectrum of complexity, with varying degrees of reflexivity and allowance for shades of moral ambiguity. On one end of the spectrum we might expect to find shows like *Full House*, *Touched by an Angel*, *Seventh Heaven*, *Highway to Heaven*—shows that exemplify what we call "after-school special" morality. On programs like these, moral situations are presented as relatively clear-cut instances of right and wrong where it only remains for characters to find their way to a patently correct answer. Typically, good characters are the protagonists, and will choose to do the "right" thing (recognizing it as such); bad characters are the antagonists, and will invariably choose to do the "wrong" thing (except when a central theme of the show is their conversion from an erroneous moral position to an ethically correct position). Good characters are generally rewarded for their virtuous actions, and bad characters are punished for their selfishness and malice. A typical scenario might be one in which a teenager is tempted to smoke marijuana in order to fit in with his peers, but comes to realize the folly of such a course of action. He is "rewarded" by landing a date with the head cheerleader, who as it turns out thinks that "drugs are bogus," while the pot-smokers end up in an automobile accident. The pedagogical efficacy of these

shows lies chiefly in their potential for instilling productive values in the very young or in persons with limited cognitive ability. A key element in Aristotelian moral philosophy is the claim that in order to achieve *eudaimonia* (roughly, “happiness”), one must develop proper moral habits well before one can engage in proper moral reasoning; the shows mentioned above aim to satisfy this requirement by leading viewers through rote motions of ethical indoctrination, with little or no room for interpretation.

(14) A second category of moral programming, slightly further along the spectrum of complexity, exemplifies what we call “culpable clown morality.” Shows in this category—e.g., *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons*, *Married with Children*, and *Just Shoot Me*—operate along the lines of classical satire, lampooning recognizable “types” who appear as ridiculous by virtue of their selfish, crude, or prejudiced social attitudes. Such shows exhibit an increased level of sophistication over shows in the first category in that their protagonists are often weak moral agents, and in that it is often this very weakness that makes the characters endearing or at least sympathetic on some level. For example, the character of Archie Bunker on *All in the Family* is on one level a reprehensible bigot who makes slurs against various ethnic, religious, and social groups (as well as against women); on another level, he is a loveable father figure whose shortcomings serve to enhance his all-too-human fallibility. Moreover, characters like Bunker (or even the more absurdly degraded Al Bundy on *Married with Children*) are not fully responsible for their shortcomings, as they are presented as subjects within an ideological system that promotes such attitudes, and in which they are ultimately victims to the same or a greater extent as the persons or groups they denigrate. The pedagogical thrust of shows like these presumes a viewer with a more advanced moral awareness than those at whom the “after-school special” programs are directed: this viewer has developed the ability to make moral judgments, and (it is hoped) may recognize his or her own shortcomings in the satirical mirror held up by the buffoon-figure, and accordingly amend his or her behavior.

(15) Related in a morally relevant way to “culpable clown” shows are voyeuristic “reality” shows such as *The Real World*, *Survivor*, *Road Rules*, *Big Brother*, etc. These shows are not written with morality *per se* in mind (for that matter they are not written at all); rather they are constructed in such a way as to place persons with conflicting personality types into stressful and somewhat claustrophobic circumstances. The result is always the same: at least some of the persons on the program behave in bad ways (e.g., resorting to name calling, back-stabbing, scheming to have the person or persons with whom they are at odds removed from the situation, rallying support against that person with the others on the show). Again, the limited pedagogical value of “reality” shows is that they can teach the reflective and somewhat morally sophisticated agent something about him or herself. On the one hand, the fact that these shows actually depict real life (to some extent) may increase the pedagogical force of these shows over that of “culpable clown” programs. On the other hand, this type of show suffers from the shortcoming that they offer no guidance for moral decision making. One might identify with an unethical agent to some degree or recognize bad properties in oneself, but one is not offered an alternative way of behaving; whereas with “culpable clown” programming there is typically another equally sympathetic character presenting an alternative “correct” course of action.

(16) A third category of moral programming, again moving further along the spectrum of complexity, exemplifies what we call “*faux* realistic morality.” Shows in this category—e.g., *ER*, *Chicago Hope*, *NYPD Blue*, and *Law and Order*—operate by

appearing to present complex moral dilemmas from a detached objective viewpoint, thus claiming a sense of moral authority while retaining a non-committal stance with respect to resolving tough moral dilemmas. The veneer of realism absorbs the audience but fails to deliver any actual moral guidance; morality is merely used to generate dramatic tension. Once the dramatic tension has been relieved the focus on the moral issue tends to vanish. One virtue of these shows is that the moral dilemmas they depict are not simple cases composed of clear-cut instances of right and wrong; rather, they are often “no-win” situations in which every alternative has both an upside and a downside, as is the case with many real-life moral dilemmas. A typical scenario might involve a physician who must choose to violate hospital policy or perhaps the physician’s code of ethics in order to save someone’s life (perhaps by using a treatment procedure that has not been approved for use). The moral and dramatic tension are intertwined as both sides of the issue are presented and argued for by sympathetic characters on the show. The pedagogical value of these shows is that they provide us with a good sense of the varieties of tough ethical choices with which one might be confronted.

(17) *Buffy*, by contrast, exemplifies the chief pedagogical virtues of the above categories of moral programming while avoiding the shortcomings of each. While “*faux* reality” shows raise moral concerns in order to create dramatic tension, *Buffy* appears to consciously “take on” moral issues for their own sake, occasionally laughing at itself in the process, as we see in the episode “Who Are You?”(Episode 4016) when Faith inhabits Buffy’s body (and vice versa). Here Faith practices impersonating Buffy in front of the mirror by saying, “You can’t do that—it’s *wrong*. You can't do that because it's naughty. Because it's wrong. Because it's wrong. You can't do that. It's wrong.” Moreover, *Buffy* provides us with a vast array of moral dilemmas ranging in complexity and sophistication from the clear-cut cases of the “after-school special” program to the no-win situation of the “*faux* realistic” program, and is, thus, reflective of the type of moral situations that confront us in real life. *Buffy*, however, goes further than these shows by taking a sophisticated moral stand on complex moral issues. In most cases the stand that Buffy and company take is the intuitively correct stand, but *Buffy* doesn’t rest on intuition alone; rather, and this is the show’s greatest virtue with respect to issues of morality: it supports the stand it takes by appeal to general moral principles (a necessary feature of sound moral reasoning).

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