

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF  
**Joss Whedon**

AN UNAUTHORIZED EXPLORATION OF *BUFFY, ANGEL, AND FIREFLY*

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# INTRODUCTION

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GILES: But that's the thrill of living on the Hellmouth! There's a veritable cornucopia of . . . of fiends and devils and, and ghouls to engage. (*everyone looks at him*) Pardon me for finding the glass half full.

—“The Witch,” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1-3)

CORDELIA: If there's one thing I learned living on a Hellmouth: every day is precious, you never know when it may be your last.

—“Double or Nothing,” *Angel* (3-18)

ANGEL: I keep saying that. But nobody's listening.

—“Epiphany,” *Angel* (2-16)

Angel is wrong. Nearly *everybody* is listening—and not just to him. We're listening to all the heroic, fiendish, always complicated characters who populate the universes created by television impresario Joss Whedon. Listening to them is as close as we get to listening to Whedon—and we haven't stopped listening since that day in 1997 when the premiere of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* kicked off a pop culture domino effect that hasn't yet subsided.

## *For Love of Joss*

Maybe we started listening to Whedon because he was so darn much fun—but we kept listening, and we're still listening *hard*, because he forces us to peer into the remotest corners of our own morally capri-

cious, emotively turbulent world. And we like that. We like the scalpel's edge intensity of the Whedonverse, the way it mirrors and makes sense of our own treacherous plane of existence. We like confronting our darkness, even if, in doing so, we think we're still just having fun.

Whedon's works are compelling, even addicting. They have bite and soul—a lot like the vampires we've come to adore. When we gaze down into the Whedonverse's fathomless abyss, the abyss always gazes back—lending the seductive illusion that we're never truly alone. The Whedonverse reveals our human condition in its most glorious and depraved variations, capturing our collective consciousness with unyielding pathos and rollicking humor. That, too, is why we keep listening, keep taking in more of that world, re-experiencing it over and over, through first runs, syndication, films, DVDs, and comic books.

Which brings us to Whedon's genius, and the source of our loyalty to him—both of which lie in his capacity to turn a translucent private vision into solid characters riddled with contradictions and emotional paradoxes. Joss gives us heroes who, amidst mesmerizing melodrama and metaphor, kissed by wit, are utterly human—especially when they aren't human at all. He gives us characters so fallible, so exquisitely flawed, that we are destined to love them and then immerse ourselves in the 'verse they inhabit.

Denizens of the Whedonverse, with their full complement of tangled relationships, are sweepingly iconic, too. They represent grand and pervading ideas that extend beyond their isolated selves: from feminism, spirituality, and Marxism, to mortality, passion, and sacrifice. The layered, near-epic quality of Whedon's work lends itself to serious study, much like the poetry of T. S. Eliot or the sonnets of Shakespeare. No other contemporary creator of media for the masses has aroused such academic *and* popular devotion to his original materials—with the possible exception of Gene Roddenberry. Publications that reflect upon the Whedonverse have mushroomed over the past half decade, spanning books aimed at fans as well as academic anthologies, professional journals, Internet journals, fan sites and blogs. University courses and international “Buffyology” conferences abound, while references to Whedon's works spring up in fields as diverse as literature, history, communications, media studies, women's studies, philosophy, religion, lin-

guistics, music, cultural studies, feminist studies, masculinity studies, queer studies, transgender studies, sociology, architecture, and of course, psychology. Whether the discussion centers on the text, the characters, the social context, the audience, or the mythos, all are excavations of what it means to engage in life, to ponder existence, to desire, to love, to nurture, to despise, to risk, to fight . . . and to die. Thus, it's hardly a stretch to suggest that, in one way or another, all studies of the Whedonverse are studies in psychology.

### *Psychology in the Whedonverse*

The breadth of the field of psychology is at least as colorful and variegated as the Whedonverse itself. Each sub-genre beneath the umbrella of “psychology” is a ‘verse of its own, uniquely endowed with history, culture, principles, dogma, traditions and traditionalists, rebels, villains, and heroes. Where strands of psychological sciences or arts intersect, they often do so tentatively, tiptoeing up to one another or accidentally bumping bits before glancing quickly away. Just as the *Angel*verse and the *Buffy*verse cross paths but do not breach boundaries, many schools of thought within psychology lean on or borrow from one another while maintaining distinct or somewhat conflicting identities.

*The Psychology of Joss Whedon* honors the diversity of psychology as an integrated, applied science. Blending theory, research, and clinical approaches, it offers a scientifically kaleidoscopic view of the Whedonverse. Yet readers needn't have a background in advanced science to thoroughly engage with each of the book's essays; they've been written for the Whedon fan, not the academic. Still, they cover an impressively wide swath of intellectual territory. Here's just a sampling of what we take on:

- ❖ We consider the question of free will in Joss's universes: Does it exist? Or, might it be a necessary illusion that we mortals clutch just to get through each day?
- ❖ We highlight evolutionary psychology, a controversially deterministic theory embracing the idea that organisms are shaped by the forces of evolution to find pleasure in that which perpet-

uates the species. Are we, therefore, especially drawn to Whedonverse residents who are “morally succulent,” i.e., who appeal to our evolutionary survival instincts? How does a father-daughter bond (or lack thereof) merge with evolution’s sexual selection processes to determine a woman’s lust/love objects? How might evolutionary theory impact one slayer’s romantic choices?

- ❖ We dive into Jungian depth psychology. Freud’s disciple, Carl Jung, postulated that in each of our psyches’ darkest corners there hides an entity containing our forsaken, denied primal urges. His theory suggests that we are most strongly attracted to others who manifest our secret, disowned traits. Does Buffy’s explosive relationship with Spike reveal her shadow-self? Is vampirism actually a metaphor for narcissism?
- ❖ We segue to traditional models of psychiatry, questioning the degree of pathology in two of the most forensically challenged males aboard *Serenity*: Mal and Jayne.
- ❖ We follow a cognitive-behavioral plan for healing adolescent anxiety and depression, and we ask: How can the experience of successfully challenging fear alter a young woman’s faulty beliefs about herself? How, especially, can this affect an anxious Chosen One, whose every day could be her last?
- ❖ We’re introduced to “terror management theory,” an innovative field of psychology that seeks to explain how people cope with the daily threat of violent death. In studying terror management, what better living laboratory could we ask for than aboard the ship *Serenity*?
- ❖ We watch feminism meet existentialism as Sunnydale residents search for meaning in the perils of life on the Hellmouth. We see existential therapy—a clinical derivative of existential philosophy and psychology—help Buffy grapple with the prophecy that death would be her gift.
- ❖ We explore Joss Whedon’s own assertion that he is a radical feminist. Along the way we dip into radical feminist theory, gender theory, social psychology, self-psychology, and feminist therapy.

- ❖ We turn our attention toward the realm of neuropsychology. How does messing with the brain change behavior and even alter human consciousness? Among all the dark arts practiced within the Whedonverse, could the science of brain-tinkering be the darkest of them all?
- ❖ We see the healing power of the Whedonverse when one brave author describes her own transformation from cult abuse victim to real-life superhero.

And, finally, we enter the Whedonverse through Darla and Angel's sado-erotic *folie a deux*. I wrote this essay, the very last in this book, for an earlier BenBella volume: *Five Seasons of Angel*. "There's My Boy" focuses on the relationship that was Angel's most formative and karmic, yet it also revisits the core psychological themes introduced in this book's preceding essays, from shadow selves to narcissism, parental influences to found-families, terror management to existentialism and the meaning of life. In fact, in *Angel*, I believe that Joss Whedon reveals how *he* sustains a sense of purpose in a tumultuously disturbing world. I think Whedon shares a perspective that could give added meaning to all the angst, all the pain, all the struggle—and even all the fitful growth—that he, his characters, and his fans inevitably confront. I believe that the creative genius, Joss Whedon, imparts his own existential secret, his own mantra, in the voice of Angel, the vampire with a soul.

But, please, *don't turn to the back of the book to seek that message!* I'm certain—and convinced Whedon would agree—that the end will be far sweeter if you pursue it slowly, relishing every ripe and juicy moment along the way.

—Joy Davidson, Ph.D.  
New York, NY  
August 2007

*If you ask an evolutionary psychologist why you keep chasing blondes with big . . . er . . . hair, she'll decipher your urges with an eye toward human adaptations designed to perpetuate the species. In fact, she'll decode every move you make, every breath you take, every vow you break in evolutionary terms—the cryptographic key to human nature. Granted, not all psychologists take so deterministic a stance on every tingle in your loins or shiver in your neo-cortex, nor do they all view moral development in neuro-evolutionary terms. But don't let that stop you from living large and rewarding your brain with Robert Kurzban's view of what makes that tingle-provoking Malcolm Reynolds so universally appealing to our sense of all that is right and good in the world.*

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## MAL'S MORALS

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### *Evolutionary Pornography*

ROBERT KURZBAN

“You don't know me, son. So let me explain this to you once:  
If I ever kill you, you'll be awake, you'll be facing me, and  
you'll be armed.”

—Malcolm Reynolds, “Serenity”

**M**alcolm Reynolds, captain of *Serenity*, is a man living on the brink of disaster. He ekes out a meager existence, taking jobs on both sides of the law. Such a man can afford, of course, few luxuries. Despite this fact, he indulges in at least three. As the opening quotation suggests, he indulges in the luxury of honor. Along with that, he indulges in the luxury of loyalty and, most expensive of all, the luxury of morality.

If you don't believe that these are luxuries, consider “The Train Job,” discussed in more detail below. Mal could have simply set sail with a tidy profit. Instead, because of his sense of honor, he earned nothing for the job, except the ire of a powerful crime lord. These “profits” would accumulate interest and, eventually (in “War Stories”), cost him a profound sum of money (earned in “Ariel”), a horrific torture session, and an ear

(subsequently reattached).

Honor, loyalty, and morality are expensive. They cause you to make important—even life-threatening—sacrifices.

In some ways, you might think audiences would react negatively to such extravagance. We have only scorn for the penniless man who, finding a couple of bucks, buys a sixer of Strohs. Isn't Mal *foolish* for such indulgences?

Perhaps. But that's not the point.

Such traits—in particular the last of the three—is, to coin a phrase, moral pornography.

And we like to watch.

### *Evolutionary Pornography*

The answer to this mystery comes from a relatively new approach to understanding human nature, evolutionary psychology (Cosmides, Tooby, and Barkow 3).

One element of this approach allows us to think about a perennial mystery, the aesthetic sense. That is, it tells us about what we will find appealing.

And we already know some of the answers.

It's the sugar in your coffee. It's the salt on your pretzel.

It's the sun on your face, soft fur on your hand, and the aroma of fresh apple pie.

It's a sexy body, scantily, or perhaps elegantly, clad.

It's skiing, surfing, parasailing, and Space Mountain.

But it would be a mistake to think that it stops there.

It is also solving a puzzle. It's deftly penned prose, honed and polished to linguistic perfection. It's the tones of exquisitely played Beethoven. It's probably the parabolic touchdown pass.

And still it doesn't end there. It's seeing her name come up on your cell phone. It's when open arms and wide smiles welcome you as you stomp the snow from your boots in the doorway. It is seeing your name at the top of the chapter. Better still, on the dust jacket.

It is not limited to the concrete. It begins with these. Or, at least, it began with these. But it didn't stop. Not by a long shot.

THIS IS YOUR BRAIN ON PORN

In a recent study (Singer et al. 467), two people were asked to play a simple game, called the “Dictator Game.” One person is given ten dollars, the other zero. The first person is faced with a simple choice: how much of the ten dollars to give to the second person, a stranger brought in just for the experiment. Thousands of participants from around the world have played variations on the Dictator Game.

This one was different. In this game, there was a third experimental subject. They couldn’t participate, but could only watch. This subject was, however, somewhat special. This subject was watching the game from inside a multi-million dollar magnet: an fMRI machine. And while the subject was watching (via computer), their brain activity was monitored. In this particular version of the game, on occasion, a “selfish” Dictator who chose to give little or no money to the other person was punished.

When the selfish Dictator—who the person in the magnet had never met and would never meet—was punished, an interesting thing happened. For some subjects (men), an area of the brain associated with reward (left ventral striatum/nucleus accumbens) “lit up” more when the unfair person was punished compared to a control condition.<sup>1</sup>

In a similar study, people in a scanner were actually able to punish people who had acted in an untrustworthy fashion towards them. Taking revenge here activated an area associated with pleasure, the caudate nucleus (de Quervain 1256).

Your brain likes to take revenge, and it likes to see the bad guys punished.

Revenge, whether you administer it or someone else does, is rewarding.

It’s the sugar in your coffee.

In other words, it’s evolution’s way of telling you that you’re experiencing something GOOD.

### *Darwinian Aesthetics*

If there is any basic principle in the history of psychology, it’s that organ-

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<sup>1</sup> This difference between conditions in the relevant brain regions did not occur in female subjects. It’s unclear why this sex difference emerged.

Everyone knows that teenage girls are insufferably self-indulgent and self-obsessed, bursting from childhood with the panicked urgency of winged insects fleeing cocoons. Narcissism is almost synonymous with that period . . . but it passes. Usually. Buffy Summers was nothing if not an “ordinary” teenage girl when the series began. Then, things changed. Big time. Carol Poole hones in on the super-slayer’s post-resurrection struggle and her obsessive relationship with bloodsucking bad boy Spike in season six, and asks us to consider the evidence that Buffy has narcissistic personality disorder. Poole offers a compelling analysis of the Jungian symbolism found in Buffy’s tumultuous affair with Spike and in vampirism itself, giving dramatically dark and deep new meaning to the term “soul mates.”

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## “DARN YOUR SINISTER ATTRACTION!”

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*Narcissism in Buffy’s Affair with Spike*

CAROL POOLE

**B**uffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS) fans have long debated whether it was genius or the opposite that led the show’s creators in season six to involve Buffy in a violently sexual affair with Spike, a vampire. Dark as it was, the story of their relationship impressed me as an insightful metaphor for the psychodynamics of narcissistic disturbance. As I will argue, Buffy’s state of mind throughout her affair with Spike was a nuanced, accurate reflection of how it feels to suffer from narcissistic pathology.

In this view, informed by psychoanalytic and Jungian ideas, Spike was not simply an unhealthy boyfriend choice for Buffy; he was an image of her own shadow, a reminder of every greedy, primal need she had disowned for the sake of being a hero. Her affair with him was a mirror image of the disturbance in her soul, and yet it also represented a desperate, unconscious attempt to repair a split in her psyche by passionately tangling with her disowned self.

## *Buffy Hates Being Killed*

Dying never brought out the best in Buffy. Twice in her seven years as Sunnydale's resident vampire slayer, Buffy died and was resurrected. In both cases, she went out like a hero but came back darker, more hurt, defensive, and self-absorbed.

Following Buffy's first death and resurrection,<sup>1</sup> she returned to Sunnydale High after a summer spent shopping, not sharing, with her dad in L.A. (He complained to her mother, "She was just, I don't know, um . . . distant. No brooding or sulking, just . . . there was no connection.") Soon she was sniping at her Watcher, Giles, and calling best friends Willow and Xander "losers." She cruelly used Xander in a sexy I-wanna-torture-somebody exhibition dance that inspired the high school's resident Mean Girl, Cordelia, to remark, "You're really campaigning for Bitch of the Year, aren't you?" ("When She Was Bad," 2-1).

Why was Buffy taking her rage out on her friends instead of directing it where it logically belonged, against demons like the vampire who killed her? In the *Buffyverse*, as in life, the psyche rarely follows a straight line, and psychologically her reaction makes a lot of sense. As Giles explained, her bitchiness was understandable in light of her traumatic experience. "She may simply have what you Americans call 'issues.' She's convinced herself that she's invulnerable" ("When She Was Bad").

The psychological defense of denial is one way we split the difference between what we need and want from the world, and what the world, in fact, offers us. Buffy couldn't change the reality that her world was full of monsters that could hurt her, but she *could* refuse to be aware of her vulnerability. Denial is considered a "primitive" defense by psychoanalytic thinkers because it first shows up in very early childhood, unlike other, more sophisticated defenses which develop later in life. In Buffy's

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<sup>1</sup> In "Prophecy Girl" (1-12), at the climax of season one's finale, Buffy succumbed to the Master, an über-vampire with a repulsive, stained, puckered mouth like a lamprey's. (Buffy called him "fruit-punch-mouth.") Having been warned that she was destined to lose this fight, Buffy stoically embraced her duty and went off to fight the Master anyway. She got in a few good blows before he choked her and dropped her face-down in a puddle, where she lay dead for about a minute before Xander showed up to revive her with CPR—a possibility the prophecy didn't mention, but didn't preclude.

case, denial apparently protected her from feeling overwhelmed by terror and rage, but at the cost of cutting her off from her friends and from all the positive aspects of her own vulnerability. In effect, it was as though Buffy were saying, “To hell with being vulnerable! I don’t need anyone, I can be everything to myself. I’m in control of my world, because I’m not going to allow anyone in it but me.”

In “When She Was Bad,” Buffy was not very entrenched in this stance. It only took her friends becoming endangered for Buffy to remember that she needed and loved them, which meant that instead of continuing to dump on her friends she had to take responsibility for her own feelings, painful as they were. In the episode’s climax, Buffy—wielding a sledgehammer, and with her murderer’s bones conveniently dug up for her catharsis—was able to demonstrate, weeping, what she still had no words for: just how much she *hated* being killed.

It was in her second death and resurrection that Buffy really got deeply into her “issues.” If it was hard for her to return to life after being killed by a vampire, her dilemma was much more complicated when she was her own killer. In addition to her trauma and conflicted feelings about being vulnerable, on returning from her second death Buffy seemed to be suffering from a self-directed rage so intense she couldn’t bear to feel it: feelings of traumatic intensity.

To recap how she got into that predicament: In season five’s finale, Buffy made a heroic, selfless sacrifice of her life to save the world and in particular to save her younger sister, Dawn. In this climactic scene, the clouds parted and a radiance in the sky seemed to beckon Buffy upward as she leapt from a tower. Music swelled behind Buffy’s final words to Dawn: “The hardest thing in this world is to live in it. Live!” (“The Gift,” 5-22).

After the fall, Buffy lay dead but lovely, serene in a white ensemble which, like her body, somehow made it through an epic battle without a mark.

During the preceding weeks, Buffy had struggled to protect Dawn from an emotionally chaotic and petulant “god,” a villain far more powerful than the vampires Buffy ordinarily faced. As Slayer, Buffy was tough but no match for a god, so she felt torn between her duty to protect Dawn and her awareness that she might not be able to. Dawn might die; so might Buffy, because as a hero she could not allow herself even to imagine saving herself by abandoning Dawn. In “The Weight of the

*Flamson takes a free-wheeling approach to freedom of will in the Whedonverse, suggesting that our belief that we have free will, even when we in fact don't, is part of what defines us as human and gives us our power to face adversity. He takes on the prophecies in Buffy and Angel that entice characters to make the very choices that ultimately bring those prophecies to fruition, addresses Mal's predictability and freedom-fighting in Firefly, and reframes the climactic question raised between Jasmine and Angel in Angel season four: "Is free will more valuable than a world free of strife and suffering?" We readers, of course, are free to determine our own views on these matters. Or are we?*

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## FREE WILL IN A DETERMINISTIC WHEDONVERSE

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THOMAS FLAMSON

Take my love, take my land  
Take me where I cannot stand  
I don't care, I'm still free  
You can't take the sky from me  
— Theme from *Firefly*

The works of Joss Whedon have addressed a number of the timeless questions raised by art and literature. Are women truly “the weaker sex”? Do past evil acts make one irredeemably evil? Can there be any realm more cruel and capricious than that of Fox Network Programming? (For those new to Whedon's career, the answer to all of those questions is no.)

Another fundamental question that has been addressed by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *Firefly* is that of freedom. Or rather, two distinct but related questions: Can we ever be said to be truly free? and, Do people need to be free? In regards to the latter question, the answer has been an emphatic and unwavering yes. But in regards to the former, the answer has been much more equivocal. Despite the seeming contradic-

tion of this state of affairs—how can freedom be worth fighting for if it may not even be available?—we will see that there is, in fact, no necessary contradiction.

### *The Feeling of Free Will*

An inescapable conclusion of human life is that, for much of the time, we are the authors of our own destiny. Every day people experience freely choosing what to do next—whether to cross the street, eat dessert, or buy a house. Some choices may feel less free than others—ask anyone in the midst of quitting smoking—but the experience of willing our actions, even those we may later regret, is a hallmark of human life. And yet, the advances of science have continuously demonstrated that ours is a material world, and most everything in it follows deterministic laws of predictable outcomes, including our own behavior. To many, the claim that our behavior is determined by prior causal forces in just the same manner as the movement of planets or the behavior of insects is an alarming, if not frightening, prospect. To counter this, it is commonly suggested that humans are in possession of a special, acausal, and indeterministic force, known as free will, which exempts us from the seeming nihilism of a deterministic universe. For the religiously inclined, this is commonly cast as the human soul, given by our creator in distinction to all the beasts of the field. For those of a more atheistic bent, who still wish to see human existence as possessing some unique quality that makes us special kinds of volitional agents, the apparently indeterministic quantum processes underlying subatomic particles are seen as a possible means of getting free will back into the admittedly physical brain and body. Both of these positions are commonly supported with recourse to the apparently empirical argument that we *must* have free will, as we experience freely choosing our behavior all of the time.<sup>1</sup> However, recent psychological research has shown this feeling to be largely an illusion: the moment we think we make a decision, it has in

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<sup>1</sup> I am, of course, vastly oversimplifying these arguments for expediency's sake. For an in-depth discussion of the problems with the indeterminist position, I refer the reader to Daniel Dennett's *Freedom Evolves*, where they are addressed with much more care and respect than I would provide anyway.

fact already been made.

In a series of ground-breaking experiments, Benjamin Libet and colleagues demonstrated that this cornerstone of human existence is, in fact, illusory: people only consciously experience choosing to do something after the neurological processes of doing so have already begun. Participants were asked to make the proverbial minimal conscious effort—lifting a finger—while monitoring a fast-moving clock, and to report the time at which they chose to do so. These participants were also outfitted with electrodes on their scalps and fingers, to objectively measure the brain and muscle activity. They found that the participants reported choosing to move their finger 500 milliseconds *after* the relevant brain activity began increasing. While half of a second<sup>2</sup> may not seem like very much time, this does show that the conscious decision is not the real source of action, but rather a report of a choice that has already been made. This means that our conscious experience of free will is not, in fact, as free as it appears.

It has also been shown that people cannot tell when their decisions are made for them, if they are not conscious of the external source of their decisions. In experiments by Ammon and Gandevia, participants were again asked to choose when to lift a finger, and also to choose which hand to use. By targeting either the right or the left side of the brain with magnetic stimulation, the researchers were able to induce the participants to choose their non-dominant hand eighty percent of the time, whereas unmanipulated participants chose their dominant hand sixty percent of the time. Despite this manipulation, the participants all reported having consciously chosen which hand to use. Similar results had been obtained previously in Delgado's slightly less controlled and more invasive experiments with a brain surgery patient, electrically stimulating portions of the exposed motor cortex during surgery to produce movement that, behaviorally, appeared normal (unlike the jerky movements produced by electrically stimulating muscles). When asked why he had made these movements, the patient reported consciously

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<sup>2</sup> Subsequent experiments by critics and supporters have shown that the exact amount of time between the initial brain activity and the conscious experience of a choice varies, but all have maintained the fundamental finding that we only experience choosing after the choice has been made.

willing to do so, claiming he was trying to look under the bed or discover the source of a noise.

Beyond demonstrating the disconnect between the conscious experience of freely willing an action and the actual neurological activity underlying it, psychologists have also demonstrated that participants can be led to experience consciously willing an action that they are not, in fact, impacting at all. Matute found that participants, asked to determine the level of contingency between an aversive noise and their typing numbers on a keyboard, reported high levels of control over the outcome, despite the fact that the termination of the noise was entirely determined by the activities of another participant. Because they had no other source to which they could attribute control, they leapt to the conclusion that they must be the ones determining the outcome.

Further, research has shown that participants will report some volitional control for events with which they know for a fact they had nothing to do. Wegner, Sparrow, and Winerman had participants sit in front of a mirror while wearing a robe, with a research assistant placing his or her hands through the arms of the robe. A series of tape-recorded instructions (e.g., clap your hands, wave them back and forth) directed the assistant's movements. Afterwards, participants were asked to rate how much they felt they had consciously controlled the activity. When the participants themselves did not hear the instructions, they provided very low responses (roughly one and a half on a seven point scale). When they did hear the instructions, however, they reported mid-level responses (about three on the scale). While not claiming full authorship of the activity, it is remarkable that awareness of what the ensuing action was to be doubled the sense of volitional control for activities that every subject knew perfectly well they were not controlling. This suggests that our feeling of free will derives in part from the presence of cues to authorship, such as prior knowledge of the ensuing action and visual evidence that the action is being performed by our bodies. In this experiment, the participants who heard the recorded instructions and saw what looked like their own hands making the movements apparently received sufficient cues to experience partial authorship, despite being consciously aware that this was not the case.

Beyond the immediate illusion of freely choosing a given action, the

*In the dystopian Firefly 'verse, the government itself is "anti-social." Were it possible for the "character traits" identifiable as the Alliance to coalesce within the body of a single individual, they would surely produce a pathological, even psychopathic character. In such a 'verse, how do we conceptualize "anti-social" behavior by citizens like Mal and his crew? Is rebellion against the status quo actually a healthy act? And if it is, how do we distinguish between one person's pro-social adaptation to a brutal world and another's genuinely delinquent behavior? Eaton and Kreuger put Mal and Jayne into analysis and, using both conventional diagnostic methods and suggested improvements to the current system, offer intriguing answers to these questions.*

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## THE ADAPTIVE, THE MALADAPTIVE, AND THE MAL-ADAPTIVE

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### *Personality Traits in Firefly*

NICHOLAS R. EATON AND ROBERT F. KRUEGER

**A**lthough *Firefly* lasted only one season, it was filled with so much information that viewers could get quite an education. Those interested in learning interplanetary diplomacy, the art of seduction, or how to curse in Mandarin were not disappointed, and the breadth and detail of the *Firefly* universe allowed audience members with widely varying tastes to find something to their liking. The character development of the series was outstanding (especially given its brief run on television), and each of the *dramatis personae* became increasingly fleshed out as the episodes progressed. While several loose ends remained after its cancellation (e.g., what was Shepherd Book's past? Would Mal and Inara ever express their mutual affection? What possessed Wash to grow that horrible moustache?), most characters' personalities were explored to such an extent that we can describe their traits with relative clarity.

This is particularly true of Mal and Jayne. And although Mal and Jayne often showed similar traits—mostly when it came to criminal behaviors—close inspection of their personalities can allow us to differentiate them in psychologically meaningful ways and to make hypotheses about disorders they may have.

*Personality Traits: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*

Everyone has a personality—even people who seem not to because they are so bland (e.g., those who are not outgoing and friendly may be high in the “introversion” trait, while those who do not enjoy many activities may be considered low in “sensation seeking” or high in “schizoid” or “depressive” traits). Many of our personality traits are considered adaptive (that is, beneficial) to our survival. Individuals who are high on traits of conscientiousness are generally responsible, competent, disciplined, and concerned with duty—in short, the type of person you want as your engineer on long trips to the outer planets. Individuals who are high on agreeableness typically are pleasant to be around, giving, modest, and not manipulative—the way you probably want your shepherd to be.

This focus on *positive* personality traits may make it seem that personality traits are always adaptive, but this is not actually the case. Just as there are traits that may make someone’s personality attractive and pleasant, so too are there traits that many people find repellant and abrasive. For example, individuals who show high levels of the hostility hostility are probably less likely to be desirable as friends (unless you find yourself frequently in need of back-up in bar brawls). These maladaptive traits are often referred to as being “pathological.”

Defining what makes a particular trait pathological is no small task due to a variety of factors that come into play. The most common conceptualization of pathological personality is that proposed by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV)*, a sort of symptom Bible to which psychologists and psychiatrists refer when making diagnoses. The *DSM-IV* lists ten official sets of pathological personality features; these sets of features are referred to as “personality disorders.” Although the personality disorders are differentiated by exactly which traits and behaviors are included in each (e.g., “persistently bears grudges”), they all share a set of common requirements necessary for them to be diagnosable, and these requirements provide a good start at defining exactly what is pathological personality.

Chiefly, the *DSM-IV* requires “an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the

individual's culture." This pattern must permeate many aspects of the person's life as well as numerous social situations. In addition, it must have begun when the individual was an adolescent or young adult and not changed over time. Finally, a pattern of personality traits is considered pathological when it leads to "significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning" (689). For our purposes, we will consider this to be a reasonable definition of what makes a personality trait, or a pattern of personality traits, pathological.

*Personality Traits: Constant as the Northern Star?*

Although the definition above requires that pathological personality traits be rigid, inflexible, and stable over time, we have to ask ourselves if this has a basis in reality. Many of us like to view ourselves as a particular type of person across all situations (e.g., Wash might think "I'm always a funny guy"), but the fact of the matter is that we probably are not. Does your level of outgoingness change between when you are full of energy and when you are exhausted at the end of a day? Do you show the same degree of interpersonal friendliness and warmth traits when talking with your best friend as you do when arguing with someone you did not like in the first place? Of course not. Even Wash is serious now and then. To varying degrees, the expression of personality traits is situationally variable—that is, traits differ from one situation to the next. Although someone may *tend* to be a certain way in general, it is likely that he or she changes when extreme situational factors are present.

The characters of Zoe and River presented excellent illustrations of the principles of situationally variable and stable personality traits, respectively. During flashbacks of the war with the Alliance, Zoe was often portrayed as a cold warrior woman (e.g., in "The Message," she stealthily positioned herself behind an enemy soldier and remorselessly slit his throat); in her scenes with Wash, she typically showed a warm and caring side. Clearly, a warm and caring personality would not have served her well during the war, nor would the personality of a cold-hearted fighter be conducive to a good marriage (unless possibly she were married to Jayne). River, on the other hand, frequently showed the trait of behavioral disinhibition (i.e., she did not adequately control certain negative behaviors, such as randomly