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Is Joss Becoming a Thomist? [*]

[1] When thinking about philosophical ideas exemplified in Joss Whedon's work, the medieval philosopher-theologian Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274) does not spring immediately to mind. Indeed, the only dialogue in a Whedon series that, to my knowledge, mentions Aquinas occurs in Season Four of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* in the episode "Beer Bad" (4004). [1] The reference is, predictably, dismissive. Buffy is in the early throes of her freshman year at UC Sunnydale. Heartsick after a one-night stand with Parker, a slick, faux-sensitive-guy campus player, Buffy allows a group of pretentiously intellectual upperclassmen to buy her some beer. As they sit in the pub drinking, the following dialogue occurs:

> Guy #1: The thing that the modern-day pundits fail to realize is that all the socioeconomic and psychological problems inherent to modern society can be solved by the judicious application of way too much beer.
> Guy #2: Black Frost is the only beer.
> Buffy: My mother always said beer is evil.
> Guy #1: Evil, good, these are moral absolutes that predate the fermentation of malt and fine hops. See . . . wait, where was I?
> Buffy: I'm really not sure.
> Guy #3: Well, Thomas Aquinas and . . . (he's interrupted by a chorus of "No's" from the group).
> Guy #2: No. There will be no Thomas Aquinas at this table.
> Guy #4: Keep your theology of Providence to yourself, frat boy. ("Beer Bad")

Nevertheless, I wish to argue that elements of Aquinas's philosophy are useful for understanding key moves in later seasons of the series, in particular seasons Six and Seven. While Season Six has been described as "remarkably religion-free" [2] and Season Seven is overtly hostile to religion, nevertheless there remain convergences with Thomistic ideas at the less obvious levels of metaphysics and moral psychology. These emerge when we consider the nature of evil in the later Buffyverse, the place of natural law, and the structure of human choice exemplified in major characters' actions. Additionally, later remarks made by Whedon in discussing *Firefly* ("Objects in Space Commentary," 1015), articulating his philosophical outlook make better sense in light of Thomism than in terms of Whedon's own Sartrean Existentialist interpretation. Examining seasons Six and Seven through the frame of Whedon's remarks about the mysteries of existence brings these Thomistic metaphysical and psychological themes to light. Therefore, I ask the reader's indulgence as we take what seems like a digression.

[2] We know that while Whedon admits a fascination for the Christian mythos [3] , he is an atheist. To my knowledge, Whedon's clearest acknowledgement of a specific philosophical outlook occurs when, in commenting on the final episode of *Firefly* ("Objects in Space"), he tells us that Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* is "the most important book I ever read." [4] Yet it is worth examining his description of what he takes from Sartre. Describing "an existential epiphany" occurring when he was sixteen, he notes: "I started to think for the first time in an adult fashion about life, about time, about reality, about dying, about all of the things that are right in front of us everyday, but that as children–- and often as adults–- we take for granted, or find some easy explanation for if we can. Um, in my case I was presented with the totality of things, um, but with no coherent pattern to put them in. I just suddenly understood that real life was happening" (Whedon, "Objects in Space Commentary").

[3] Note that this is an epiphany, not a crisis. It is a recognition of all that goes on right in front of us, of the fact that life is real and that it is happening. The experience Whedon describes is the same one posited by Aquinas and his commentators as the starting-point for metaphysics. [5] In spite of the daunting theological edifice that was Aquinas's own aim, the conceptual starting-point of his system is concrete and accessible to all. It is our ordinary human experience, of a world of material things, and of persons and other creatures interacting with those things. We know this world through sense-experience and active engagement with it. A basic experience is that

things are various and different from each other, yet insofar as they are real, *existing* things, they are the same. Thus, reflecting on our experience of things, we recognize that the meaning of something, *what* it is, is not the same as the fact that it *is.* In terms of metaphysical categories, there is a basic difference between essence and existence. As such, the existence (*esse*) of any thing is irreducible to its essence. Additionally, *esse*, as that which distinguishes a mere possibility from a reality, is an act or activity; the sense of act as a verb is crucial to notice. Commentator John Knasas explains: "Philosophical reflection discerns that the thing's existence is an act of the thing somewhat similarly as a man's running and speaking are other acts, though existential act is unique in its basicness and fundamentality to the thing." [6] With this in mind, let us return to Whedon's comments, in which he describes his reaction to reading *Nausea*:

> I did know that this book spoke to what I believe more accurately and truly than anything I had ever read. And what it talked about was the pain of being aware of things and their existence *outside* of their meaning, just the very fact of . . . objects . . . in space. That we cannot stop existence, we cannot stop change, we have to accept these things, and again if we see no grand plan in them, we have to accept them as existing completely on their own, and existing totally. . . . I do know there's a passage in the book that says, "Nothing can exist only slightly." And the protagonist is so overwhelmed by this, the fact that every piece of paper he picks up off the ground exists so completely, is so much there, it actually makes him nauseous, it makes his stomach hurt, it's too intense. [7] Um, for me, uh, it has a kind of rapture to it, and I find meaning in objects to be a *beautiful* thing because I have no plan to put them in. 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, ""Objects in Space Commentary")

The ball has functionality, which is partially a result of our assignment of meaning to it, and partially a result of some determinate features within itself (e.g. its roundness); most importantly, it has its own integrity as an existing thing. In this passage, Whedon draws one Sartrean conclusion, about the lack of a divine plan. But the other, about meaning*less*ness, is held only inconsistently, and with none of Sartre's disgust indeed Whedon characterizes his own general reaction as a kind of rapture. A meaning remains with the object; this is *not*

Sartre's famous experience of "the diversity of things, their individuality," as "only an appearance, a veneer" which can melt, "leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder–-naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness." [8]

[4] Sartre and Aquinas share an emphasis on the primacy of existence, but where Sartre saw monstrosity, Aquinas saw existence as "the guts, the perfection of everything." [9] On this understanding of Aquinas, the act of existence, of actuality, contains all perfections in a dynamic, outflowing and communicative way. To be anything is also to be in communicative relations with other things. Different creatures have different potentials for communication (and thus for understanding and attributing meanings to things) and different powers, but the basic dynamism is the ground of us all. As one commentator characterizes, "Existence is the central piece of the whole thing." [10] Following Aquinas to his own theological goal, we arrive at an understanding of God as the pure act of existence, and finite creatures as following from God's unlimited actuality. Following further, we arrive at a conception of evil as a peculiar sort of non-existence–-the lack of some perfection in an entity that should have it.

[5] At points in his remarks, Whedon stresses human acts of *imbuing* meanings to things. Discounting the science-fiction device of the spaceship as a "God ship" more powerful and knowing than its passengers, Whedon notes, "I'm just trying to get the audience to see people who are relating to the space, the objects, *only* on that level. Because ultimately what I'm saying about them is that they do have meaning, and it's the meaning we bring to them, and that's what makes *us* so extraordinary" (Whedon, ""Objects in Space Commentary"). It's the ability to imbue a grotesquely functional gun with the more benign meaning of a tree branch that distinguishes River as ". . . a good person" in contrast to the almost equally psychic and equally disconnected bounty hunter Early. Whedon continues in an extraordinarily non-Sartrean vein: "What makes objects so extraordinary is the *fact* of them, the very fact of them. It's mind-boggling. I believe that whether you have faith or not–-to think about consciousness, our ability to understand that these things exist and to think about the fact of existence" [11] (Whedon, ""Objects in Space Commentary").

[6] Things do touch; River's physical experiences of things in her "disassociative" brain state are possible because objects reach out to her as well. Unlike Sartre's protagonist, River does not recoil at being "very much a part of everything she touches" (Whedon,

“Commentary”). She moves in and out of presented and imbued meanings, striving to bring some good out of her situation. With this in mind, let’s return to Aquinas and the notion of essence. We can start by saying that essences, potentials for *what* things are (ball, round thing, tree branch, gun,) are patterns and structures that in crucial respects *limit* the dynamic outflowing of the primary act of existence. Some of these limits are inherent in the world itself; the roundness of the ball cannot be at the same time squareness, since matter will not accommodate these two patterns at the same time in the same place. Additionally, some contemporary interpreters of Aquinas emphasize the place of the human knower-actor in imbuing meanings in shifting, potentially endless ways. [12] Recognizing our own dynamic activity of positing meanings–-“what makes *us* so extraordinary” (Whedon, Commentary)–-prompts us to ask about the grounds for that activity itself. Interrogating our own drive to know, and seeing it as potentially endless, a Thomist would eventually arrive at an intellectual affirmation of Infinite Being in the context of a real world that in its own existence obscurely communicates that Being. But far from giving us a Pollyannaish picture of Providence, such an affirmation rests upon both insight and darkness–-it is “mind-boggling”–-and can be accompanied by both “pain” and “rapture.”

[7] Returning to a consideration of Whedon, I hope I have made it at least plausible that what Whedon pulls out of *Nausea* cannot be interpreted in a Sartrean vein either conceptually or affectively. Whedon does not affirm absurdity. While one may perhaps still argue that he is a kind of existentialist (less akin to Sartre and Camus than to their colleague Merleau-Ponty [13]) and I have no interest in claiming that he is a closet theist, [14] the most basic elements of his worldview fit a Thomist frame. Whedon is approaching Thomism not religiously but metaphysically, through recognition of the wondrous character of existence.

[8] Turning now to consider *BtVS,* there are additional elements later in the series that tip the balance away from Existentialism and toward Thomism. Clearly the Buffyverse has never been value-free or absurd. There are operative natural and supernatural laws, with which Buffy, her cohorts, and even the First [15] must comply. Granted, the situations of particular characters, such as Angel and Spike as ensouled vampires, Oz and Anya, Giles and Willow as murderers , reveal the poverty of dualist moral thinking and the need for what philosopher Martha Nussbaum would call a fine-grained perception of particulars, [16] as well as the moral failures of human beings and some inconsistency by the writers. [17] But underpinning the situational complexities of life in the Buffyverse are a few absolutes

that do “predate the fermentation of malt and fine hops” (“Beer Bad”). When Spike says, “That's the thing about magic. There's always consequences,” (“Afterlife,” 6003) he is affirming a precept that in the Buffyverse is universal, and that operates both physically and morally.

[9] Likewise, the overarching thematic about the nature of evil in the final two seasons exhibits a convergence with Thomistic themes. We are presented with two different meditations about evil as a privation, [18] as no specific sort of entity with its own determinate nature, but rather as a lack of some goodness that a thing by its nature should have.

[10] Season Six explores what this means on the human level. Greg Forster notes, and I agree, that the code of ethics underpinning the Buffyverse is ultimately eudaimonistic. [19] This is another convergence with Thomism, via Greek philosophy. In eudaimonism, humans are figured as seeking happiness, while happiness is understood as the attainment of those things that are genuinely good for oneself, as opposed to those things that only seem to be good. Thus, along with eudaimonism comes a theory of human nature and of the fulfillment of one’s nature. For Aquinas we are ordered ultimately to God. While we are free to make various choices about the means of attaining the final end, we are not free with respect to the end itself. Humans naturally and necessarily seek for their happiness. [20] Ultimately, happiness is the attainment of the Perfect Good, i.e. the beatific vision (ST 1-2.5.2: II.609). An implication of this view is that the will is ordered to the good and “can tend to nothing except under the aspect of good” (ST 1.82.3: 1.414). For Aquinas, sin results not because we choose evil *as* evil, because that is impossible, but rather because we choose a good relative to us in place of a greater good. Such a choice is not a mere mistake, due to lack of information or the like, but rather an irrational failure to obey the dictates of one’s own conscience as to the ordering of goods. Such a choice is often incredibly damaging and horrific. But it remains that one chooses under an aspect of good.

[11] Leaving the question of the Perfect Good out of the picture, let’s apply this to Season Six. In Season Six all the villains are human. And what is sobering (or perhaps annoying, depending on your perspective) is how badly most of the characters do in their choices. I will focus on the “Big Bads” of the season first, then consider Xander, and indirectly, Anya. Buffy’s situation after her involuntary resurrection is clearly crucial, but worthy of a more extended discussion than I can give here. I just suggest that the development of

her relationship with Spike through Season Seven subverts a straightforward Sartrean analysis of its sadomasochistic elements, and I believe it can be accommodated within a Thomistic frame.

[12] Clearly the members of the Trio think they are enamored with evil and claim to be evil. Their schemes center around harassing Buffy, coming by money, and finding ways to manipulate women. But what they really want is to avoid the difficult work of growing up, of facing themselves, risking abandonment, and slogging through the inevitable stages of life. In Thomistic terms, we could say that what's really going on here is that they are pursuing a relative good--the superficial trappings of adulthood--rather than the greater good of genuine adulthood. Their most damaging acts--of cruelty and rage in the case of Warren, of betrayal and cowardice by Andrew and Jonathon--are wrought by each individual's insecurity about his value to others. This insecurity can be understood as a result of their failure to choose the first good and gives rise to a set of compensating choices to pursue power over others. Thus their first set of choices only exacerbates their insecurities, setting up the stage for greater corruption. Even the First, in the guise of the Master, notes that part of the point of the journey is "to learn something about ourselves in the process" ("Lessons," 7001).

[13] Willow is the bigger bad of the season, and while much has been said about her arc being a metaphor for addiction, her decision structure is the same. Magic becomes an easy means to attain goods that while genuine, must be fully understood in their contexts. To avoid the risk of losing Tara by letting her see her deep insecurities, an event which must occur if they are to establish the greater good of genuine intimacy, she uses forgetting spells with variously disastrous effects. This can be understood in Thomistic terms as choosing the more immediate, lesser good (a peaceful life with Tara now) over the more remote, greater good (a genuine intimacy with her). Upon Tara's death Willow's inability to handle her painful emotions, resultant in part from a lack of practice, is partly what prompts her to seek the immediate satisfaction of action. Squaring off with Giles she hijacks the power loaned him by the coven. But as it contains "the true essence of magic" (the communicativeness and interconnectedness of Being), she gets more than she bargained for when she is confronted with the reality of others' pain:

> WILLOW: It's incredible. (panting) I mean, I am so juiced . . . Giles, it's like . . . no . . . mortal person has . . . ever had . . . this much power. Ever. It's like I, I'm connected to everything . . . I can feel . . . it feels like . . .

I . . . I can feel. . . (She pauses and her smile begins to fade.) . . .everyone. Oh. Oh my God. All the emotion. All the pain. No, it, it's too much. It's just too much.
GILES: (weakly) Willow . . . It doesn't have to be . . . like that. You . . . you can stop it.
WILLOW: (panting) Yeah. I, I can. I have to stop this. (getting up) I'll make it go away.
GILES: Willow. . . .
WILLOW: Oh, you poor bastards! (“Grave,” 6022) [21]

Later, addressing Buffy, Willow taunts her:

WILLOW: For all your fighting . . . thinking you're saving the world . . . (Cut back to the pit. Buffy listens in amazement.)
DAWN: Buffy? (Buffy puts up a hand to silence Dawn.)
WILLOW: And in the end . . . I'm the only one that can save it.
BUFFY: By killing us?
WILLOW: It's the only way to stop the pain.

Even her final, nihilistic and clearly irrational choice is framed in terms of a relative good, that of ending pain.

[14] Xander functions somewhat as “everyman” in the series, as he is the only recurring character who is not exceptional, either by virtue of supernatural origins or powers, or outstanding intelligence. While he does not rise to the stature of a Big Bad in Season Six, he manages to do terribly by leaving Anya at the altar. Or, more precisely, standing her up is the clumsy correction for a previous series of wrong choices. His situation illustrates for us the difficulty of ours--we live an unpredictable mixture of clarity and obscurities, some internally generated, some externally induced. While the Xander-Anya relationship has some very nice depth to it, and it helps each character to grow, it remains that neither is ready to marry. While she does love him, the only-recently humanized Anya is also clinging to Xander in order to avoid the work of finding out for herself what it now means for her to be human. And Xander will never succeed in a relationship until he confronts the damage of his home life. Xander’s action on his wedding day was, arguably, the better thing to do given his recognition that they shouldn’t marry. His sin was in suppressing the voice of his conscience in the months before. As he tells Anya: “It wasn't you. (sighs) It wasn't you I was hating. (pauses) I had these thoughts, and . . . fears before this” [22] (“Hell’s Bells,” 6016). Xander

chose, like Willow, the more immediate good of life today with Anya (and giving in to her pressure to marry) over the delayed, but greater good of a relationship involving more self-understanding.

[15] What about the picture of moral choice in Season Seven? In his analysis of Season Seven, James South [23] shows how it uses the Platonic metaphor of the cave in various ways. One of Plato's aims in the Allegory of the cave is to emphasize how our choices are distorted by desire-induced fantasies. [24] South argues, convincingly, that the Hellmouth alludes to Plato's cave, and that the story arcs of Willow, Anya, Spike, and Buffy are meditations on the sources and variety of such fantasies. Willow, Anya, and Buffy manage to escape the cave when they recognize how their fantasies have distorted their comprehension, while Spike escapes only partially. Thus far, South's analysis converges with mine; a Thomist perspective can make sense of both desire-induced fantasies and the experience of seeing through those fantasies. So I won't belabor the point about evil at the level of individual choices. But South raises the further point that the Platonic metaphor, and the accompanying teleological model of reality, are themselves desire-induced fantasies. As an explanation of bad behavior that situates it within a framework of overarching goodness, it provides us with a comforting story. He understands the latter part of Season Seven as a subversion of the Platonic teleology. Insofar as Aquinas's understanding likewise assumes an underlying teleology, in continuing with my examination of Season Seven it will be important to consider whether my interpretation falls prey to fantasy.

[16] While Season Six explores evil at the human level, Season Seven moves to a cosmological frame. In what seems like a clear attempt to reject any sort of Christian reading of the Buffyverse, we learn that the First is, well, first. As the First in the guise of the Master tells Spike in the opening episode, we're going "Right back to the beginning. Not the Bang. Not the Word. The true beginning" ("Lessons"). By specifically discounting the Bang and the Word as heralding the "true beginning," I think the First is claiming primordiality, perhaps even priority. At first it seems like maybe things are setting up for some sort of Manichean model, or, more interestingly, a view of evil as the ground of reality. But what we get is a situation where the First's story cannot be the whole story of the First. We get, appropriately enough, a half-truth. And we get a teller--an entity that yearns to communicate. The power of the First, while formidable, is also always parasitic. Giles instructs, "it only works through those it manipulates" ("Bring on the Night," 7.10) and this entails the prior existence of creatures to be manipulated. While "it has eternities to act, endless resources," it could not have been the

one to have created those resources, for it remains unable to take corporeal form except “in the guise of someone who’s passed away” (“Bring on the Night,” 7010). Even then, it remains generally a figment, invisible except to those it is actively manipulating. It yearns for incarnation; discussing the possibilities for (in this case, sexual) contact enjoyed by humans, the First/Buffy admits, “I envy them. Isn’t that the strangest thing?” (“Touched,” 7020).

[17] Interestingly, the First gains efficacy by exploiting others’ power, as in the case of its momentary possession of Willow, and by mining the disappointments, fears, insecurities and yearnings that Season Six has explored. Aquinas notes, “what evil is must be known from the nature of good” (ST 1.48.1: 1.248-9). Although it is “nothing” in the sense of not having a determinate nature of its own, evil is not an illusion and the resources for evil are as immense as Creation. What we find out in experiencing evil is the immense potential for darkness in existent things, especially humans but perhaps other beings as well. We see how far beings can fall away from the good, and the horrible damage that can ensue. But even this, horrific as it is, also tells us indirectly about what those various sorts of beings are or were, and about the dynamism--the power and energy--of existence. Returning to *Buffy,* the fact that the First remains largely unknown cannot simply be that “it predates any written history, and it rarely show its true face” (“Bring on the Night,” 7010). At the risk of implying that Giles is wrong, perhaps, as an entity given over entirely to evil, the First *has* no single, true face, as evil “itself” has no independent form or nature of its own (ST 1.48.1: 1.248-9). As the First/Mayor tells Faith, “Nobody’s explained to you how this works, have they? You see, I am part of The First, as you kids call it, but I’m also me. Richard Wilkins III, late mayor and founder of Sunnydale” (“Touched,” 7.20). [25] That its efficacy remains parasitic on the capacities of those it manipulates is suggested in the exchange between Faith and Wood after Faith’s encounter with the First/Mayor:

> FAITH: I’m so pissed off at myself. I knew it was a trick . . .
> WOOD: So did I but I still wanted my mother to hold me like a little baby. (off her look) In a manly way, of course.
> FAITH: (smiles) Of course.
> WOOD: Listen, nobody wants to be alone, Faith. We all want someone who cares, to be touched that way. I mean, the First may deal in figments but that wanting is real. (“Touched")

As the apotheosis of evil, the First cannot be known directly, only indirectly, through the myriad possibilities of those whose

resources it can hijack. I should note that there is a possible counter-example to this idea in “End of Days” (7021) when the First and Caleb merge. The guise of a dead person is dropped and a monstrous form appears. And there is a transfusion of power that manifests in Caleb in the form of physical strength. Nevertheless, it remains unclear the extent to which it is Caleb’s own desires for a “sacred” experience that structure the encounter. When the First appears as Buffy, the entity seems to take on not only the form but the persona, and as Buffy the First engages in flirtatious banter. When Caleb indicates his discomfort and reminds the First/Buffy that it is a sacred experience for him, she responds, “And for me as well,” but in a decidedly bored manner (“End of Days”). While I would not go so far as to say that Caleb ravishes himself, I suggest that it is his wanting, no less than Faith’s or Wood’s, that dictates the form his experience with the First will take. And while the First has a consistency in its aims, it is likewise unclear the extent to which this consistency is a reflection of basic psychological similarities in human beings. [26]

[18] As long as the world exists, the possibility for evil remains. This is because in important respects good things are the cause of evil; there is nothing else to be the cause except for existing things, and all existing things have some measure of goodness somewhere. Utilizing Aristotle’s theory of four dimensions of causality, Aquinas reasons that there must always be a material cause of evil, a medium of operation, inasmuch as something must exist with qualities and powers that can be lost. The efficient cause must likewise be good, as evil can be brought about only by a being with its own qualities and powers. Finally, for Aquinas God is responsible for an ordered and various universe, in which there is a *diversity* of beings with different powers and potentialities. If variety is better than sameness, then this dictates the creation of corruptible beings. Whether this theodicy is convincing is not a question I wish to answer; my claim is that assuming such a perspective helps to make sense of the show. In this light, Joyce’s claim that “evil is always here,” a part of things and “of us” is not so far off the Thomistic mark. Nor is the exchange between Caleb and the First/Buffy:

> CALEB: “But you . . . you’re everywhere. You’re in the hearts of little children, you’re in the souls of the rich, you’re the fire that makes people kill and hate. The fire that will cure the world of weakness. They’re just sinners. You are sin.
> THE FIRST/BUFFY: I do enjoy your sermons.

("Touched")

Additionally, it is significant that much of the moral growth various characters, including Andrew, Anya, Faith, and Spike, undergo involves their having to take account of, and be accountable for, their own capacities for evil.

[19] As noted above, James South argues that while the first part of Season Seven figures evil as parasitic upon good, the latter part repudiates this metaphysics. Only by seeing past this model of evil, and the whole teleological frame supporting it, can Buffy escape the Hellmouth and her destiny as "Sunnydale Girl." [27] I think this analysis works pretty well, especially in terms of the Platonic metaphor of the cave. Buffy must indeed think "outside the cave, not in the sense of getting outside and seeing the Good, but the outside of the whole inside-outside the cave dichotomy." [28] She must think beyond/outside a teleology in which nothing is fortuitous, especially not her status as the Chosen one on a Mission. She does, of course; after coming by the scythe, an artifact with no status in the original Slayer narrative, and seeing her fantasies reflected back to her by the First/Buffy, it "occurs" to her that there are other possibilities in the Slayer narrative. Only after this occurrence can she and the gang rethink the meaning of power and defeat the First. South argues, convincingly, that this turn of events takes us out of the Platonic narrative into some other conceptual space. But what if we weren't quite in it to begin with? At the risk of perpetuating a desire-induced fantasy, I suggest that insofar as Thomism rejects Platonism, and opts for a world in which time and contingency is real, it is not obvious that its teleology is so rigidly deterministic, or good and evil so univocal. In the cave, Buffy's "occurrence" is inexplicable. In a Thomistic frame, it is an instance of "insight," [29] the process of going beyond the data with which one is presented to grasp its unity in an unexpected way. Irreducible to inference or deduction, it is nonetheless a quite ordinary experience. Where it takes us, if we weren't in the cave to begin with, is not so clear. Perhaps to where we were before, to a world of real existents manifesting myriad possibilities for good and evil, and a community of sometimes "amazingly screwed up" people working to save the world, thinking for some reason it is "something that really matters" ("End of Days"). In this world, even Aquinas admits that the Godhead remain "in hiding." [30] *BtVS* invites us to ponder these issues in so many imaginative ways, with wit and compelling characters. Metaphysical riddles and Spike without his shirt . . . that's worth staying in for!

[*] Many thanks to my readers for their helpful suggestions and to Josef Velazquez for a crucial clarification.

[1] Written by Tracey Forbes, “Beer Bad” (4004) is often castigated as one of the worst in the series. Yet Whedon claims, “I think it has some lovely stuff in it.” http://www.buffy.nu/article.php3?id_article=941

[2] Anderson, p. 226.

[3] “Bronze VIP Archive for December 15, 1998,” “The fact it (sic), the Christian mythos has a powerful fascination to me, and it bleeds into my storytelling. Redemption, hope, purpose, santa, these all are important to me, whether I believe in an afterlife or some universal structure or not. I certainly don't mind a strictly Christian interpretation being placed on this ep by those who believe that--I just hope it's not limited to that.” http://www.cise.ufl.edu/cgi-bin/cgiwrap/hsiao/buffy/get-archive?date=19981215. Accessed May 21, 2004. Also cited in Anderson 212.

[4] Joss Whedon, “Commentary” for “Objects in Space.”. Continuing later, he notes, “I don’t want to paint myself as an intellectual. I don’t really know anything about philosophy. I did know that this book spoke to what I believe more accurately and truly than anything I had ever read.”

[5] Interpreters as diverse as Fredrick Copelston (324-25), W. Norris Clarke, and Bernard Lonergan all stress the primacy of ordinary experience as the starting-point for metaphysics. Throughout the paper, my interpretation combines elements of two contemporary Thomist movements: Existential Thomism, exemplified historically by Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain; and Transcendental Thomism, sparked by Lonergan’s more explicit consideration of Kant. For a brief overview, see “John Knasas on Thomistic Metaphysics Past, Present and Future."

[6] “John Knasas on Thomistic Metaphysics Past, Present and Future.”

[7] I think the passage Whedon is referring to occurs early in the book. “I very much like to pick up chestnuts, old rags, and especially papers. It is pleasant to me to pick them up, to close my hand on them; with a little encouragement I would carry them to mouth the

way children do. . . . So today, I was watching the riding boots of a cavalry officer who was leaving his barracks. As I followed them with my eyes, I saw a piece of paper lying beside a puddle. I thought the officer was going to crush the paper into the mud with his heel, but no: he straddled paper and puddle in a single step. I went up to it: it was a lined page, undoubtedly torn from a school notebook. The rain had drenched and twisted it, it was covered with blisters and swellings like a burned hand. The red line of the margin was smeared into a pink splotch; ink had run in places. The bottom of the page disappeared beneath a crust of mud. I bent down, already rejoicing at the touch of this pulp, fresh and tender, which I should roll in my fingers into grayish balls.

I was unable.

I stayed bent down for a second. I read I read "Dictation: The White Owl," then I straightened up, empty handed. I am no longer free, I can no longer do what I will.

Objects should not *touch* because they are not alive. You use them, put them back in place, you live among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it is unbearable" (Sartre, *Nausea* 10).

[8] In a famous passage the protagonist encounters a chestnut tree: "So I was in the park just now. The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench. I couldn't remember it was a root any more. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, stooping forward, head bowed, alone in front of this black, knotty mass, entirely beastly, which frightened me. Then I had this vision.

"It left me breathless. Never, until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of 'existence.' I was like the others, like the ones walking along the seashore, all dressed in their spring finery. I said, like them, 'The ocean *is* green; that white speck up there *is* a seagull,' but I didn't feel that it existed or that the seagull was an 'existing seagull'; usually existence hides itself. It is there, around us, in us, it is *us*, you can't say two words without mentioning it, but you can never touch it. . . . If anyone had asked me what existence was, I would have answered, in good faith, that it was nothing, simply an empty form which was added to external things without changing things in their nature. And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It has lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root

was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder--naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness" (Sartre, *Nausea* 125-27).

[9] "A Taste of Existence." In the *Summa Theologica* Aquinas writes, "Existence is the most perfect of all things, for it is compared to all things as that by which they are made actual' for nothing has actuality except so far as it exists. Hence existence is that which actuates all things, even their forms." Cited as ST, followed by Question, Article, and part number, then by volume number and page number. Thus ST 1.4.1: 1.21 designates Question 1, Article 4, Part 1, found in Volume 1 on page 21. Subsequent citations will be included in the text following the same convention.

[10] "A Taste of Existence."

[11] This final, grammatically obscure sentence is presented verbatim.

[12] This is the direction Bernard Lonergan takes. See "Knasas" for an overview of different strands of contemporary Thomism.

[13] Like Whedon, Merleau-Ponty finds meanings as a dialectical interplay of projection and disclosure. Like Whedon, Merleau-Ponty is a non-tragic atheist who continues to use Christian imagery in his descriptions.

[14] Seritella.

[15] As the First, in the form of Warren tells Andrew: "You know the rules. I can't take corporeal form. . . . Believe me, I would do this stuff if I could. I can't" ("Never Leave Me," 7009)

[16] Nussbaum. I am not suggesting that Nussbaum's Aristotelean particularism is ultimately compatible with Aquinas' affirmation of moral law.

[17] Lisa (no last name supplied) raises interesting points about some glaring inconsistencies in the Buffyverse, "Code of the Whedonverse - Elect and the Damned?" http://www.bloodyawfulpoet.com/essays/whedonverse.html.

[18] See Hibbs and Rambo. On Aquinas' notion of evil as privation, see ST 1.48.1: 1.248-9, "Whether Evil Is a Nature?": "One opposite is known through the other, as darkness is known through light. Hence also what evil is must be known from the nature of good. Now, we have said above that good is everything appetible; and thus, since every nature desires its own being and its own perfection, it must be said also that the being and the perfection of any nature is good. Hence it cannot be that evil signifies being, or any form or nature. Therefore it must be that by the name of evil is signified the absence of good. And this is what is meant by saying that *evil is neither a being nor a good*. For since being, as such, is good, the absence of one implies the absence of the other."

[19] Forster 7.

[20] This notion is of course problematic on several grounds. What are we to make of seemingly idle and random actions? To maintain that frivolous activities are not really exercises of will implies that Aquinas's theory is not adequate to account for human freedom. Conversely, it seems plausible that people can renounce things they sincerely believe to be essential for their own happiness, as when estranged spouses stay together for the sake of their children. See Kenny 68-70. While the second problem can be reconciled on the theological plane, the first remains.

[21] http://www.buffy-vs-angel.com/guide.shtml

[22] http://www.buffy-vs-angel.com/buffy_tran_116.shtml

[23] South.

[24] http://www.buffy-vs-angel.com/buffy_tran_142.shtml

[25] http://www.buffy-vs-angel.com/buffy_tran_142.shtml

[26] In this discussion, I've specifically steered clear of interpreting the First as something like a fallen angelic being. But for Aquinas, an entity like Satan was entirely compatible with a notion of evil as privation, and would likewise result in some consistency of qualities.

[27] South, paragraph 19.

[28] South, paragraph 26.

[29] Here I'm thinking particularly of the work of Bernard Lonergan.

[30] See Aquinas's prayer, "Adoro to Devote," online at several sources, including http://www.nashvilledominican.org/Prayer/Prayers_and_Devotions/Eucharistic_Prayers.htm.

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