

Marquette University  
**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

Philosophy Faculty Research and Publications

Philosophy, Department of

---

10-1-2004

# On the Philosophical Consistency of Season Seven; Or, "It's not about right, not about wrong ... "

James B. South

Marquette University, [james.south@marquette.edu](mailto:james.south@marquette.edu)

---

Published version. *Slayage*, Vol. 4, No. 1-2 (October 2004). [Publisher Link](#). © 2004 Whedon Studies Association. Used with permission.



**James South**

**On the Philosophical Consistency of  
Season Seven: or, 'It's not about right,  
not about wrong...'**



Broken like a window I see my blindness now.  
Sam Phillips, "I Need Love"

I was a fine idea at the time. Now I'm a brilliant mistake.  
Elvis Costello, "King of America"

But fictive things/Wink as they will. Wink most when  
widows wince.

Wallace Stevens

[1] I'm sure that we all have favorite scenes from *BtVS*. I'm actually going to start this essay with my favorite scene. Although it's not from Season 7, it sets my essay up nicely. It's from "Choices" (3019):

Willow: Deep thoughts?

Buffy: Deep and meaningful.

Willow: As in?

Buffy: As in, I'm never getting out of here. I kept thinking if I stopped the Mayor or . . . but I was kidding myself. I mean, there is always going to be something. I'm a Sunnydale girl, no other choice.

Willow: Must be tough. I mean, here I am, I can do anything I want. I can go to any college in the country, four or five in Europe if I want.

Buffy: Please tell me you're going somewhere with this?

Willow: No. (hands Buffy a letter) I'm not going anywhere.

Buffy: UC Sunnydale?

Willow: I will be matriculating with Class of 2003.

Buffy: Are you serious?

Willow: Say, isn't that where you're going?

Buffy: I can't believe it! Are you serious? Ah, wait, what am I saying? You can't.

Willow: What do you mean, I can't?

Buffy: I won't let you.

Willow: Of the two people here, which is the boss of me?

Buffy: There are better schools.

Willow: Sunnydale's not bad. A-And I can design my own curriculum.

Buffy: Okay, well, there are safer schools. There are safer prisons. I can't let you stay because of me.

Willow: Actually, this isn't about you. Although I'm fond, don't get me wrong, of you. The other night, you know, being captured and all, facing off with Faith. Things just, kind of, got clear. I mean, you've been fighting evil here for three years, and I've helped some, and now we're supposed to decide what we want to do with our lives. And I just realized that that's what I want to do. Fight evil, help people. I mean, I-I think it's worth doing. And I don't think you do it because you have to. It's a good fight, Buffy, and I want in.

Buffy: I kind of love you.

Willow: And, besides, I have a shot at being a bad ass Wiccan, and what better place to learn?

Buffy: I feel the need for more sugar than the human body can handle.

Willow: Mochas?

Buffy: Yes, please. It's weird. You look at something and you think you know exactly what you're seeing, and then you find out it's something else entirely.

Willow: Neat, huh?

Buffy: Sometimes it is.

[2] There's much I could talk about in that exchange, but for the purposes of this essay, I'm going to focus on two issues that emerge from this scene. One is Buffy's realization that one can think one knows exactly what one's seeing only to find out it's something else entirely. That, it strikes me, is an important theme of Season 7—indeed the theme that ties the season together. The second theme is foundational for the story I'm going to tell: Buffy seems forever bound to be "Sunnydale Girl." There is no apparent escape. And yet we know, in retrospect, that's not the case. I want us to think about how it is that Buffy did escape Sunnydale.

[3] Let me do a little set-up work. Elizabeth L. Rambo, in an excellent *Slayage* article, makes two points in relation to the Season 7 “Big Bad,” The First Evil. She alludes to the “Augustinian” nature of the confrontation between Buffy and The First: the idea that evil has no positive existence of its own; that evil is parasitic on good. Second, she notes that precisely because of its parasitic nature, evil is banal—boring and unoriginal—and she extends this point to explain why, ultimately, The First was such a bore as a “Big Bad.” Now, I’m less concerned with the televisual sufficiency of The First as villain, than the cluster of ideas that I can extract from its presence, since from a philosophical perspective, I think the boring aspect is very important. In fact, I don’t even think The First is all that boring—at least not when compared to Buffy during the middle parts of the season. Those speeches! Who can blame Andrew when he decides not to videotape those? But, as we’ll find out soon enough, Buffy’s boring speeches have a philosophical pay-off as well, one we can begin to appreciate by wondering about the significance of having a hero more boring than the Big Bad. To foreshadow a bit, before this talk is finished, I will argue that Buffy was perhaps the *real* Big Bad—at least for most of the season.

[4] So, without taking anything away from Rambo’s paper, which I take to be a kind of platonic form of *BtVS* criticism, I nonetheless want to build my paper around a questioning of her claim about Augustinianism and its role in the show—not because I think she is wrong about Augustinianism and its presence in Season 7, but because I think her analysis is incomplete. And, in keeping with the spirit of Season 7, I want to question this claim by going back to a beginning—the philosophical origin of the kind of position enunciated by Augustine. In particular, I want us to think about that most potent of philosophical metaphors: Plato’s metaphor of the cave. The reason should be obvious enough: what’s a Hellmouth if not a cave-like structure? And what better way to think about the Hellmouth than to think about the metaphor of the cave? Or so I hope to show in what follows.

[5] Let me refresh your memory about Plato’s cave:

Picture human beings living in some sort of underground

cave dwelling, with an entrance which is long, as wide as the cave, and open to the light. Here they live from earliest childhood, with their legs and necks in chains so that they have to stay where they are, looking only ahead of them prevented by the chains from turning their heads. They have light from a distant fire, which is burning behind them and above them. Between the fire and the prisoners, at a higher level than them, is a path along which you must picture a low wall that has been built, like the screen which hides people when they are giving a puppet show, and above which they make the puppets appear.

'Yes, I can picture all that,' he said.

Picture also, along the length of the wall, people carrying all sorts of implements which project above it, and statues of people, and animals made of stone and wood and all kinds of material. As you'd expect, some of the people carrying objects are speaking, while others are silent.

'A strange picture. And strange prisoners.'

'No more strange than us,' I said.

One lesson of the metaphor of the cave is exactly the one Buffy mentioned near the end of the scene from "Choices:" "You look at something and you think you know exactly what you're seeing, and then you find out it's something else entirely." But let's worry about that just a bit by highlighting the sort of mis-seeing that the Cave metaphor identifies. First, for Plato, the issue about appearance and reality, or knowledge and illusion, is not a "Matrix-like" skepticism—in philosophical terms, the issue isn't how do we know that we aren't brains in vats. Instead, the big issue for Plato is the problem of what I'll call, following Plato scholars, 'desire-induced fantasy.' In the words of one commentator on the *Republic*, "...desire distorts our vision so that we see what we want to see, rather than what is in fact there." In this sense, the worry at its extreme might be more like an insane girl who imagines an entire world in which she alone stands between her fantasized world and its destruction.

[6] Yet while that might be one way of exemplifying Plato's metaphor, it doesn't quite do justice to the fact that Plato has Socrates state that the bound inhabitants of the cave are "no more strange than us." We are all in the

cave, and even within the cave I think we have resources to distinguish between an internal traumatically induced fantasy world and the world in which we go about our daily business.

[7] However, in addition, I want to stress that the cave metaphor itself is a kind of desire-induced fantasy. And the end of Season 7 with its destruction of the Hellmouth represents, I think, a destruction of precisely the kind of thinking represented by the image of the cave. More about that later, though. For now, I want to illustrate how the cave metaphor in the first sense—the desire-induced fantasy sense—illuminates and ties together many events in Season 7. I do this for two reasons. First, I tend to think that desire-induced fantasy does, in fact, play a large role in human life. Thus, if the only lesson we get from Season seven is the place of such fantasy in human life, that's an important one. Second, though, I think we can only get to the really big lesson of the season by working our way through a desire-induced fantasy. So, by appreciating the strategies the characters use in overcoming such fantasies, we might be in a better position to understand the big desire-induced fantasy that the season as a whole addresses. That, would, as it were, end the lesson. Now, necessarily, I must be selective, though, I hope, representative enough. If there's a bias in my example selection, it's not likely to be a surprise to anyone who knows me, nor will it skew the data—the character driven trajectory that I take could be taken with any of the opening credit characters.

[8] Let me start with Willow. Between the Willow of "Lessons" (7001) and the Willow of "Chosen" (7022) an entire route out of the cave gets charted—a way through an interconnected set of desire-induced fantasies. The Willow of "Lessons" wants to be Willow, is connected to a great power, and is, of course, being Willow, full of self-doubt. In other words, over the first two episodes, Willow's plight neatly encapsulates the key themes of the season: issues of power, issues of connectedness (or the lack thereof), and issues of self-identity. So, I want to trace out how Willow's issues in the first two episodes of the season cash out over the next several episodes. However, I want to remind you of a very nice bit of foreshadowing that's especially relevant to the second half of my paper. In one of her moments of self-doubt, Willow

poses the following question: "Does that mean I have to be a bigger, badder badass than the source of all badness?" ("Beneath You," 7002) Other than the nice Willow-y alliteration, what makes this question so important is that, as we shall see, it asks **the** big philosophical question of the season by explicitly raising the issue of the source of badness and by flagging the kind of power that I think gets called into question. Bracket that thought for now, but keep it in mind.

[9] Moving on, then, in "Same Time, Same Place" (7003) we see Willow a victim of her own desire-induced fantasy. Her fantasy in this case is generated internally and manifests itself through who Willow is—the magic that's part of her. Note that, by the time the episode is through, we'll have seen Willow in a cave, paralyzed, helpless, and alone except for a particularly repulsive skin-eating demon—all a result of her self-induced, subconscious magic spell:

Willow: No. Please stay. I missed you so much when I couldn't find you.

Buffy: We missed you too. I missed you. Dawn's, uh, working on what caused the mutual no-see-ums, but so far we haven't—

Willow: I did it.

Buffy: You did a spell?

Willow: I didn't mean to. I-I just remember thinking I wasn't ready to see you guys yet. I was afraid we wouldn't, you know, connect.

Buffy: So, you made it happen just by thinking it?

Willow: Guess I have a ways to go before I master my powers, huh?

"Making it happen just by thinking it": a perfect way of describing internal desire-induced fantasy. Willow's both metaphorically and literally cave-bound because of her desires, and survives only because of the connection she has with Buffy, Xander, and, somewhat surprisingly, Anya.

[10] Despite Willow's slight boost of self-confidence at the end of the episode that allows her to use magic to restore her flesh, she is hardly out of the cave. She recognizes that she hasn't mastered her powers, and she has literally discovered the truth of the claim made in "Lessons": "From beneath you, it devours." The identification of her

insecurities and self-doubt, as well as the concretely realized instantiation of them in the cave, with the “it” seems obvious enough.

[11] Moving on, consider “Conversations with Dead People” (7007). In this episode, Willow is confronted by an external source of fantasy that exploits her internal doubts—The First Evil manifesting as Cassie who claims to be able to communicate with Tara. While Willow manages to avoid the too direct suggestion that she kill herself, the seed for more self-doubt has been planted. That is, she has internalized an external source of fantasy. In this case, the ‘it’ doing the devouring is analogous to the way that Plato thinks social illusions shape the way we think about the world. The concrete result is that when Willow next needs to use her magic, in “Bring on the Night,” she fails miserably and allows The First Evil to manipulate her. The result is that she totally distrusts her ability to use magic effectively: the very thing that she will have to do to play her part in defeating The First.

[12] One more example: in the “Killer in Me” (7013) we see a mixture of external and internal fantasy. The external takes the form of a “hex” (or more technically, a “penance malediction”) targeted at Willow by her nemesis in magic, Amy. The result of the hex is that Willow takes on the appearance of the dreaded Warren Mears, Tara’s murderer and the proximate cause of Willow’s attempt to destroy the world in Season 6. Why this punishment? Amy explains that the hex allows the hexee’s subconscious to pick the punishment. The point is to play on Willow’s weakness, by using power, but we discover that the *real* power is within Willow’s subconscious—the power that, first, makes her punish herself for kissing Kennedy, and that holds herself responsible for Tara’s death; but also the power that, by connecting with Kennedy at the end of the episode, takes responsibility for her power, and, as it were, takes her back to the beginning. This beginning is the foundation on which she will re-connect with herself so that she will be able to do magic again, especially when called on in “Chosen.” The first step forward occurs in the aptly named “Get It Done” (7015) when she uses her skills to bring Buffy back from the land of the shadowmen. Note the striking visual echo in the way she sits in the circle with the way she was sitting when she made her reconnection with Buffy in “Same Time, Same Place.”



[13] Enough about Willow until I talk about "Chosen." Let me turn to another character who exemplifies the various ways in which desire-induced fantasy can take over: Anya. Consider the song she sings in "Selfless" (7005)—a flashback to her state of mind in Season 6:

Mr. Xander Harris.  
That's what he is to the world outside.  
That's the name he carries with pride.  
I'm just lately Anya.  
Not very much to the world, I know.  
All these years with nothing to show.  
I've boned a troll,  
I've wreaked some wrath,  
But on the whole,  
I've had no path.  
I like to bowl,  
I'm good with math,  
But who am I?  
Now I reply that  
I'm the Mrs.  
I will be his Mrs.  
Mrs. Anya Christina Emanuella Jenkins Harris.  
What's the point of loving . . .  
I mean except for the sweaty part.  
What's the point of losing your heart?  
Maybe if you're lucky  
Being a pair makes you twice as tall.  
Maybe you're not losing at all.  
No need to cover up my heart,  
Plus see above RE: sweaty part.  
So maybe love is pretty smart  
And so am I  
I found my guy!  
And I'll be Mrs.  
I will be his Mrs.  
Mrs. Anya Lame-Ass-Made-Up-Maiden-Name Harris.  
We'll never part  
Not if we can  
And if we start  
Then here's my plan  
I'll show him what bliss is  
Welcome him with kisses  
'Cause this is a Mrs. who misses her man  
He's my Xander

And he's awfully swell  
It makes financial sense as well,  
Although he can be—I'll never tell—  
Just stand aside  
Here comes the bride  
I'll be Mrs.  
I will be his Mrs.  
I will be—

Of course, there's then a very abrupt cut to Anya with a sword through her chest.

[14] This song is a wonderful example of desire-induced fantasy, though it's rather difficult to tell just where the boundaries between internal and external are. And look where it ends up—Anya with a sword through her chest. "I will be," indeed. Where to start? There's an entire retro feel to the song, to the look (e.g., Anya's dress), to the lyrics. And nostalgia is an obvious form of desire-induced fantasy. In part, it's Anya having internalized (perhaps not wholly successfully) an old-fashioned paradigm about wifely identity, but more broadly, her desire-induced fantasy can be neatly encapsulated in the complaint she makes about the song she and Xander sang in "Once More, with Feeling": it's a retro pastiche identity and has little coherent unity. Her problem is that she's let her self be controlled by an image—a desire-induced image—one of vengeance being who she is, fed by D'Hoffryn, Halfrek, and her disconnection with Buffy and the gang. Now, let's follow Anya's progress. Again, having gone back to the beginning in "Selfless,"—note her assertion that there may not even be a me to save—over the course of the season she reconnects with the Scoobies.

[15] Buffy, to her credit, refuses to let Anya take herself out of the loop, stating that she wants her friends around. Anya immediately recognizes that she possesses strategizing skills and accepts their need for help from her. Perhaps not quite what Buffy had in mind, but it reconnects her. By "Bring on the Night," she's back to her old truth-telling self, having previously connected with Xander (their good cop/bad cop routine in "Never Leave Me" (7009)) and now Dawn—and being quite clear on the realities of their situation in relation to Spike: "Yeah, he'll help. You know, if he's not crazy or off killing people or

dead. Or, you know, all of the above.”

[16] Whatever fantasies Anya still harbors, they don't stop her from perceiving the rest of the world clearly. Watch her lecture in “Empty Places” (7019) and contrast that with the flat-footedness of Buffy in the same episode:

Anya: OK . . . I know you're all upset . . . and I, myself, would much rather be sitting at the bedside of my one-eyed ex-fiancÈ than killing time here with you people in this over-crowded and might I add increasingly ripe-smelling basement. And I would be, too, if not for a certain awkward discussion he and I recently had right over there on that cot immediately following some exciting and unexpected breakup sex. But . . . I need to give him some space . . . so I'm doing what I can do, contributing any way I can . . . and so will all of you. You still need to know this information. We can't stop just because something else is trying to kill you, too.

Buffy: Look, I wish this could be a democracy. I really do. Democracies don't win battles. It's a hard truth, but there has to be a single voice. You need someone to issue orders and be reckless sometimes and not take your feelings into account. You need someone to lead you.

For Buffy, it's not about what others want to do, it's about what she orders them to do. By contrast, Anya is perfectly clear that, as it were, she wants to empower the potential slayers. By “End of Days” (7021) we have Anya declaring, indirectly, her love for humans and her need, as a lame human, to do what's right. There's no role-playing anymore, just Anya being human and seeing the world for what it is. It's noteworthy that her insight brings her the ability to sleep on the eve of an apocalypse—indeed, she's the only one who can.

[17] That's two characters we've seen who started out the season suffering from desire-induced fantasies and, by the end of their season-long journeys, both have managed to climb out of the cave, as it were, into the bright light of the Good. That is, they've come to see through their desire-induced illusions. Anya has taken on the Cassandra-Like role of truth-teller (not storyteller), while we know that Willow will be central to taking down The First.

[18] Now, here's where it gets tricky. Remember that I said at the beginning of the essay that I thought that

there were two important points to the cave metaphor. We have seen one point nicely represented in the cases of Willow and Anya—the fact that desire-induced fantasy plays a huge role in human life. And we have been introduced to some of its sources, as well as the need to wipe the slate clean, as it were, in order to make progress. The second point I want to make today is a more radical one: to put it bluntly, the metaphor of the cave is itself a desire-induced fantasy. Think about why Plato constructed the metaphor in the first place. One function of this metaphor is to provide an explanation for Socrates's execution. That's one of the reasons why we're told that the philosopher who returns to the cave will meet with a certain death. But there's a more important fantasy element in the metaphor: the cave explains why people behave badly by situating bad behavior within an overarching framework of the good. That is, by providing us with a metaphor in which one can progress from inside to outside, Plato also has provided a metaphor in which the outside is co-terminous with the good. Outside the cave we find the good, and everything inside the cave is a distorted image of that very good. I must admit that this image supplies us with a *comforting* story: people who do bad do so because they think they're trying to do good, but because of desire-induced fantasies of various sorts, they have a mistaken view about what is good. In short, Plato's fantasy is that all badness is contained within goodness.

[19] Now, as Elizabeth Rambo has so clearly shown, that's a standpoint that is readily applicable to Season 7: "Thus, Buffy, the guiding light of the Buffyverse, more than any other "good" character, is the First Evil's "mommy" ("Chosen," 7022), not because Buffy is evil—though she certainly is not perfect—but because evil cannot be self-existent, though it likes to think it is." This parasitic, or as I'll call it, dialectical, relation between good and evil is abundantly chronicled in Season 7. But—and here's the thing—I want to argue that the series ends up repudiating this dialectical relationship. More precisely, only by repudiating the relationship can Buffy escape the Hellmouth, and by extension, escape the fate of being "Sunnydale Girl."

[20] Central to Rambo's argument, and importantly for me, The First is portrayed as committed to this Platonic

fantasy. It is envious of Buffy and her friends, or, perhaps more generally, humanity (cf. "Touched" (7020)). Even more troubling, though, is that I think Buffy and company see things "Platonically" for most of the season. They envy the power of The First, of his minion the uber-Vamp, and even of Caleb. It's *that* sort of power they want. This commitment on the part of Buffy to the Platonic/Augustinian conception of evil provides some evidence that Buffy, in fact, is the "big bad" of Season 7—the mother of all evil. Luckily (and mark that term!), things don't *end* that way, and in seeing how things change, I think we see the ultimate philosophical lesson of Season Seven.

[21] To gain some perspective on what I'm trying to argue here, think about Caleb. He talks a lot, and his talk is filled with the language of good and evil, clean and dirty. He's the one with power on his side, with a mission to purify the world. That is, evil is trapped within the second level of the cave metaphor. It sees itself as the other side of good—indeed, as really good, especially as exemplified by the slayer and her potentials—the dirty girls.

Caleb: Well, that was, uh . . . Are you all right?

Shannon: Thank you. Thank God you were there.

Caleb: Well, let's not give him credit for everything.

(smiles) No, I'm funning you. I don't believe it was a coincidence. I also don't believe young girls should be out in the woods late at night—should be tucked in bed.

Shannon: Wish I was.

Caleb: I expect you do at that. Look, I don't mean to pry, but those boys . . . they looked like— Well, you didn't happen to fall in with devil worshipers, did you? Na, I'm—I'm sorry. You, uh, you look like you've been traveling a while. I didn't think that— Is there some place you'd like me to drop you? You heading some place?

Shannon: Sunnydale.

Caleb: I'm going there myself. I ain't never been, but I expect we could find a police station or a—

Shannon: I just need to get to Revello Drive. Um, thanks, Father . . .

Caleb: Call me Caleb. Never was nobody's daddy.

Shannon: I'm Shannon.

Caleb: Well, Shannon, you feel like telling me why those Freaky Joe's were after you?

Shannon: I'm not sure.

Caleb: Well, do you ever think that maybe they were chasing you because you're a whore?

Shannon: What?

Caleb: Now, I know what you're thinking. Crazy preacher man spoutin' off at the mouth about the whore of Babylon or some-such. That ain't me. I'm not here to lecture you. I mean, what's the point? My words just curdle in your ears. Wouldn't take in a thing. Head's filled with so much filth that ain't no room for words of truth. Well, you know what you are, Shannon? Dirty.

Shannon: What? I'm not! What're—

Caleb: Now, now, now. There's no blame here. You were born dirty, born without a soul. Born with that gaping maw wants to open up, suck out a man's marrow. Makes me puke to think too hard on it. [Shannon tries for the door] Yeah, that there door's problematical. I don't know as I could recommend steppin' out at this speed anyway. You're like as not to tumble some. But, of course, there's my boys back there—Ooh, they hate to miss a mark.

Shannon: Your boys?

Caleb: Well, they ain't exactly my "blue eyed boys" but they're hard workers. And they don't truck with Satan—that was just me having fun. Satan is a little man. (Shannon reaches for the steering wheel) I don't like back-seat drivers.

Shannon: Please . . . don't hurt me.

Caleb: Well, now, is this the part where you offer to do anything? Because I tried to make it clear—you got nothin' I want to explore. [Caleb presses his ring, which he's heated with the cigarette lighter, into Shannon's neck.] Oh yeah. That's it! That's a cleansing fire.

Hallelujah! Now, if I'm not mistaken, there's a car a little ways behind us, and I do believe there's some folk in it goin' the same place you are. Now, I want you to deliver a message for me, but it's not for them. It's for the other one—the one and only, the original, accept-no-substitute slayer. Would you tell her something for me?

Shannon: Yes.

Caleb: Thank you, Shannon. [Caleb proceeds to stab Shannon and toss her from the pick-up truck.]

There's simply too much in this clip. Besides the obvious "Caleb has a message for Buffy" point, which is pretty obviously an evil parody of the good news of the gospel, here's what I want to emphasize: a) There's the claim that Satan is a little man; b) There's all the language

of dirtiness, whorishness, soullessness, etc.; c) There's the claim that "I don't believe in coincidence;" d) There's talk of the one, original, accept-no-substitute slayer.

[22] The Satan is a little man claim clearly references the Platonic view of the derivative nature of evil—The First Evil and its minions cannot really consider themselves evil—they're after the *real* good, and all those pale imitations are just trying to be like them. In the same way, the language of dirtiness endorses a perspective in which evil is really good and good really evil. That's a pretty clear analogy to the way things can be deceptive in the cave, but even more it suggests that you can't think of things as bad without relating them to good. Caleb is simply the mirror image of those (the Scoobies) who think of The First as "evil." That's straightforward enough and rehashes ground I've gone over. The next two points force us forward. First, Caleb is insistent that there's one, original slayer. I'm going to want us to think about the word "original" there. Second, the issue of coincidence is crucial. Caleb doesn't believe in it, and from within the perspective of the cave story, that makes perfect sense. Let me expand on these two latter points a bit.

[23] One thing that the Cave metaphor does is provide us with a view of the world and human agents that is teleological. In fact, there are two senses of teleology present in the metaphor. First, it allows us to explain why people do what they do—they seek the good, even when they do evil. Moreover, by making the distinction between inside the cave and outside the cave, Plato explains why people are, on the whole, no good. It's because they can't get to the good directly due to desire-induced fantasies. That latter point seems about right, really. It's hard to imagine a critical theory getting off the ground without acknowledging such a fact. We simply are, in the words of Anya, "really, really screwed up in a monumental fashion." ("End of Days," 7021)

[24] However, the cave myth also points to a way out of the shadows of desire-induced fantasies. While we are, by and large, constrained by the cave, it's possible to escape the cave and achieve true happiness, to be really good. After all, presumably Socrates escaped the confines of the cave. One way to think about that possibility is to think

that such a person is superior to everyone else. And who do we know who is committed to a view that one person is superior to everyone else? Caleb, certainly—Buffy is the original, accept-no-substitute slayer—but Buffy, too, views herself as superior (see, “Conversations with Dead People”). No matter how conflicted she feels about her superiority, no matter how much her believing herself to be superior makes her feel inferior, she accepts that *she* is the original, accept-no-substitute *slayer*. The one girl, blah, blah, blah.

[25] But there’s a second, more worrisome, way in which the cave metaphor is teleological. In the very way that Plato crafts the metaphor, it is obvious that the cave can’t be destroyed. The cave metaphor as a whole exhausts reality: there’s the cave where most humans live out their lives pursuing various distorted images of the good, and there’s outside the cave where the lucky few, philosophers, get to see the good in an undistorted way. The metaphor represents a self-enclosed whole. How do you destroy something that you can’t escape? Now, you can escape the cave itself by recognizing your desire-induced fantasies (the way Willow and Anya do), but you can’t escape once you’re outside the cave—there’s nowhere else to go.

[26] Now, extend this line of reasoning to Buffy and you can see the looming problem. Buffy must destroy the cave, The Hellmouth—that’s where The First is hanging out and it’s where The First is assembling the army he’s going to use to take over the world. But as long as she accepts the cave story, the dialectical relation between good and evil, she can’t destroy The First or The Hellmouth. What she needs to do is think outside the cave, not in the sense of getting outside and seeing the Good, but outside the whole inside/outside the cave dichotomy. She needs to think outside The Hellmouth, and that’s something she has a very hard time doing throughout the season—after all, she’s “Sunnydale Girl,” and that self-description is connected to both The Hellmouth story and the slayer story. For Plato, destroying the cave would be tantamount to admitting that there’s no ultimate good in the sense of a teleological principle—something for the sake of which everything is done, no matter how distorted. For Buffy, destroying the cave would be tantamount to destroying herself—at least from her perspective within the slayer story.

[27] Think for a minute about what it would mean to live without the cave. It would be to give up a fantasy of ultimate meaning: things don’t happen for the sake of



some grand design. It would be to live with the notion of chance and fortune, since if everything is for the sake of the good, neither chance nor fortune has a place. In a teleological world, nothing just happens, but instead everything happens for a reason. The strongest statement of such a view that I know belongs to Hegel: "The sole aim of philosophical inquiry is to eliminate the contingent." Plato is a little more nuanced, but the point is the same. People who successfully escape the cave "would work out that it was the sun which caused the seasons and the years, which governed everything in the visible realm, and which was in one way or another responsible for everything they used to see." That is, they would see that their desire-induced fantasies within the cave were just distorted images of the Good.

[28] Now, if teleology implies a world in which nothing is fortuitous, in which everything is for the sake of an end, it makes perfect sense that Caleb wouldn't hold with coincidence. That would be a world in which he couldn't see himself as dialectically related to the good. Once again, Anya points us in the direction I want to go:

Buffy: Look, I wish this could be a democracy. I really do. Democracies don't win battles. It's a hard truth, but there has to be a single voice. You need someone to issue orders and be reckless sometimes and not take your feelings into account. You need someone to lead you.

Anya: And it's automatically you. You really do think you're better than we are.

Buffy: No, I—

Anya: But we don't know. We don't know if you're actually better. I mean, you came into the world with certain advantages, sure. I mean, that's the legacy.

Buffy: I—

Anya: But you didn't earn it. You didn't work for it. You've never had anybody come up to you and say you deserve these things more than anyone else. They were just handed to you. So that doesn't make you better than us. It makes you luckier than us. ("Empty Places" (7019))

Anya's talk about the "legacy" Buffy inherited is particularly on topic: it's not a necessary inheritance, but a chosen one. It didn't have to go the way it went. But then that also means we need not be bound by the way it went. This issue of the slayer "legacy" returns us to the last

of the topics included in Caleb's little talk: Buffy is the original, accept-no-substitutes, slayer. Here, I want to focus on the term "original" because it points us to slayer origins, and, origin stories are notoriously teleological stories—things are instituted for the sake of something.

[29] In "Lessons" (7001) The First, performing its morphing act, tells Spike that they're going back to the "true beginning" and, significantly, The First connects that remark with the remark that "It's about power." Thus, it would seem that there's a very close connection between beginnings and power. As the season progresses, we get acknowledgement of this connection in two ways—ways that neatly parallel the two senses of the cave metaphor. Think about the brilliant "Lies My Parents Told Me" (7017). I venture to say that much of this episode could be read as providing support for the way in which our desire-induced fantasies originate and the ways in which they exert their power, but that's not a path taken in this paper, mostly because of considerations of length. Still, let's consider, briefly, the Spike story in the episode. We're told that the power of Spike's trigger (the song that makes him kill) can be found in its origin. In Spike's case, understanding the source of the power his trigger possesses manages to defuse the power. The song no longer triggers his murderous, vampiric desires. I take the Spike story in "Lies My Parents Told Me" to be a straightforward example of how to escape the cave in the first sense of the cave story: returning to the origin of the fantasy releases him from a powerful desire-induced fantasy. Nonetheless, it's not clear to me that Spike's release from the cave constitutes more than a release from the cave in the first sense. After all, he returns to the cave, but doesn't survive the cave's destruction. Think for a minute about his motivation in returning to the cave. It's to prove that he's a champion—to himself and to Buffy. But thinking oneself a champion is itself a desire-induced fantasy in that being a champion only makes sense if one accepts the cave story: that some people just are superior to others. One really must think one is superior, and not luckier, than others. Spike may not be as neurotic as Buffy is when she feels inferior for being superior, but he's definitely neurotic in thinking he's a champion.

[30] Let me contrast that kind of origin story, that is, the

kind that releases one from the cave while allowing one to remain within the ambit of the good, with another kind of origin story. The origin story most relevant for my argument is the one that Giles has told Buffy—for seven seasons. Of all the lies told by parents (and is there a more parental figure on the show than Giles?) that's the one with the most serious consequences. It's bound Buffy in the cave, The Hellmouth, but it's been the source of her power as well. And while the Slayer's power may come from having been chosen, nonetheless—and this is crucial—it's a peculiar sense of power; one bound up with the teleology of the cave story. In Season 7, one word comes to be shorthand for this teleology: "mission." Whatever Buffy does for the sake of the mission she does because a) she was chosen to do it and b) because the action she does preserves or promotes the mission.

[31] Think about "Get It Done" (7015). In that episode, we see the dialectical relation between good and evil made perfectly clear in the account of the formation of the first slayer. Indeed, the cave imagery is of almost anvil-like proportions, especially in the way Buffy is bound underground in a cave wearing black and white clothes. Metaphorically, the very thing that keeps her bound to the cave, unable to break out of the second cave story, is both what has led her to succeed up to now, but is also pretty obviously what's leading her to fail now. Having seen the origin of her power, Buffy's at something of a loss. She thinks she understands its lesson, the lesson she communicates to Wood at the end of "Lies My Parents Told Me:" "The Mission Is What Matters." That understanding is a cover-up job, though, a kind of desire-induced fantasy much like Plato's attempt to explain Socrates' death. Buffy may think she understands what it is to be a slayer when she admits that she would sacrifice Dawn for the mission, but reality has a surprise for her: this understanding of the mission is going to mean she'll lose.

[32] In "Dirty Girls," (7018) she goes after Caleb, and she does lose—badly, and with disastrous consequences for some potentials, for Xander, and for herself. In the next episode, "Empty Spaces," (7019) she's shown that if the mission is paramount, she's expendable too. A nifty little lesson, that is. It's in "Touched," (7020) that Spike shows her the beginnings of a way through the impasse, but not

perhaps in quite the way he meant to. Buffy may be, in Spike's terms, "a helluva woman," (though given all I've said, I think we can read that adjective in multiple, and not necessarily flattering, ways), but the way to victory against the cave story isn't going to go through his additional descriptor: her unique status as "the one." After her good night's sleep with Spike at her side, she proves that she's a woman when she goes against Caleb. Caleb says that when he lays a hand on her she'll be "just a dead little girl," but Buffy shows him that she's more than a girl, and in doing so claims the scythe. However, while she may no longer be "Sunnydale Girl," she remains, as it were, "Sunnydale Woman." What she needs to do is escape from the "Sunnydale" moniker, her second level cave-like, desire-induced fantasy.

[33] To see how that remaining breakthrough arises, let's think a bit about the scythe. Notice how it falls outside the standard slayer story—Giles is flummoxed that such an item can exist without him having heard of it. And, of course, as many fans complained, the introduction of the scythe seemed pretty lamely ad hoc, or even a kind of *deus ex machina*. It probably won't surprise you when I say that it's precisely the ad hoc status of the scythe that makes it so important. After all, think what sort of thing could disturb a cave story like the one Giles has told Buffy over 142 episodes. It couldn't be anything internal to the story, since anything internal would be subsumable under the overarching teleology of the cave/slayer story. So, we get a counter-story. The counter-story is about a pre-Christian artifact, the scythe, or, as its guardian calls it, "a last surprise," forged for the slayer. **[Editors note: See Zoe-Jane Playen on pre-Christian feminist themes in *BtVS*.]**

[34] Just before Caleb snaps her neck, the guardian explains that Buffy's arrival to claim the scythe means that "an end is truly near." The surprising word here is "an" and not the anticipated "the." Of course, Caleb immediately, and necessarily given the cave he's trapped within, supplies the "the." But here's what's interesting: the guardian's message comes from within the system (the guardians were watching the watchers after all) but it's not part of the teleological cave story of watchers and slayers, good and evil. It's both inside and outside the inside/outside of the hellmouth/slayer story. It is, as it

were, the system self-disrupting, but not for a reason—not for “the end,” but for “an end.” Such self-disruption is intolerable in a cave-like story and would have to be subsumable under the inside/outside of the cave—perhaps as some clearer access to the Sun. But that way of understanding the scythe *would* make it a *deus ex machina* in the pejorative sense of the term. By re-thinking the kind of power Buffy finds in the scythe, though, I think we can see that it’s not a *deus ex machina*, but instead a lucky event, a surprise. And certainly it can’t be God-like in any way, since that would imply teleology.

[35] That brings us, at last, to the final point I want to make. It concerns the meaning of “power.” All season we’ve heard the word used, but, really, when it comes right down to it, what is power? There’s one thing we find out in “Chosen” (7022)—power is not force, or brute strength, or anything that we’re accustomed to associate with the term. Instead, we learn at the end that power is really just potentiality. From the Latin *potere* to be able, in this sense “power” involves possibilities. And, need I say, being trapped in a desire-induced fantasy is a condition that closes off possibilities. The somewhat unfortunate cookie dough speech illustrates that Buffy herself realizes that the worst thing she can do is close off possibilities. The point is not to think too far ahead, she tells Angel, and that makes perfect sense inasmuch as thinking too far ahead clearly forecloses possibilities. For Buffy, the crucial moment is when she realizes that she’d been, in Dawn’s apt phrase, a “dumbass.” It’s exactly when Buffy confronts her “big bad” self—The First spouting the slayer mythology, that Buffy sees her desire-induced fantasy reflected back at her. The disconnect between the slayer story (she alone, blah, blah, blah) and the litany of “weapons” that she has at her disposal (her dead lover, Faith, her friends, her wanna-slay brigade) hits home and it “occurs” to her that they’re going to win.

[36] Note the word “occurs”—it’s intransitive. Like the scythe, there’s no explanation for her realization available from within the slayer story. She doesn’t infer it, she doesn’t deduce it, she doesn’t even “realize” it. It’s not part of the slayer story at all. It just occurs. And when Buffy presents her plan to everyone, Faith gets it—the plan is “pretty radical.” Here again, etymology makes my

point: “radical” is derived from the Latin “radix,” which means “root.” Buffy’s gone back to the beginning, to the source of her power as slayer with all the cave-like structure that entails. In striking at the root of her power, she opens up new possibilities.

[37] Consider Willow one last time. She tells us that using her power will go “beyond” anything she’s ever done—striking at the root of her own desire-induced fantasies—and that “it’s a total loss of control.” But what is “control” if not the dialectical partner of cave-supported power? Thus, it’s through the renunciation of control that Willow can transform the power of the scythe, just as it’s Buffy’s renunciation of the slayer story that allows her to go beyond The First in power.

[38] At the end of “Chosen,” we see Buffy in full possession of her newly recognized power, and she’s breaking out in a genuine smile. She can do whatever she wants—well, except shop at the Sunnydale Mall. She’s destroyed the slayer story she’s been trapped in for years by undoing its source, and she’s destroyed the cave—with its teleological constraints. She’s “scrunched” The First Evil. Dare I say that for the first time, Buffy is really happy—not because she has fulfilled her destiny as a slayer, but because she has chosen to reject that destiny.

[39] Of course, this is hardly the end of Buffy’s story—much more could be said. However, I want to end by discussing a potential objection. It might be thought that I have placed Buffy and company in a world in which good and evil no longer exist. That’s only partly correct. While I think the ultimate lesson of the season is a destruction of Buffy’s slayer story and, by extension, a recognition that teleological stories can be more destructive in their own way than the kind of evil they try to contain, I don’t think the world as reconfigured by Buffy is one in which anything goes. In describing the lessons learned from Darwin and Freud, Adam Phillips has written:

Indeed, for both of them we are the animals who seem to suffer, above all, from our ideals. Indeed, it is part of the moral gist of their work not merely that we use our ideals to deny, to over-protect ourselves from, reality; but that these ideals—of redemption, of cure, of progress, of

absolute knowledge, of pure goodness—are refuges that stop us living in the world as it is and finding out what it is like, and therefore what we could be like in it.

[40] As Willow states, Buffy and company have changed the world. But it would be a mistake to think that the change is for the better, just as it would be a mistake to think it's a change for the worse. It's *a* change; there's a world filled with new possibilities. In short, I take it that the ending of the series is not a happy one, in any ordinary sense of the word "happy." Happiness in that sense would imply an orientation to yet another teleological story, and, hence, a betrayal of the ultimate "lesson" of the season. I think the most we can infer about Buffy's world after "Chosen" is that it's no longer a Buffyverse. She's inaugurated a momentous shift, a reconfiguration of options. But that doesn't mean that "good" and "evil" have been destroyed, just one possible way of understanding, and being trapped by, these terms. For Buffy, it's still the case that it's all about choices, and it's time for her, and by extension the rest of us, to go to work.

### Works Cited

Lear, Jonathan. *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

\_\_\_\_\_. "Restlessness, Phantasy, and the Concept of Mind," in *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 80-122.

Neiman, Susan. *Evil in Modern Thought*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

Phillips, Adam. *Darwin's Worms*. (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Tom Griffith. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Rambo, Elizabeth L. "'Lessons' for Season Seven of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." *Slayage* 11/12 (2004) <<http://www.slayage.tv>>

Reeve, C. D. C. *Philosopher-Kings: The Argument of Plato's Republic*.  
(Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988).